the absolute sound

THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

MARCH 2024

2024 Editors' Choice Awards

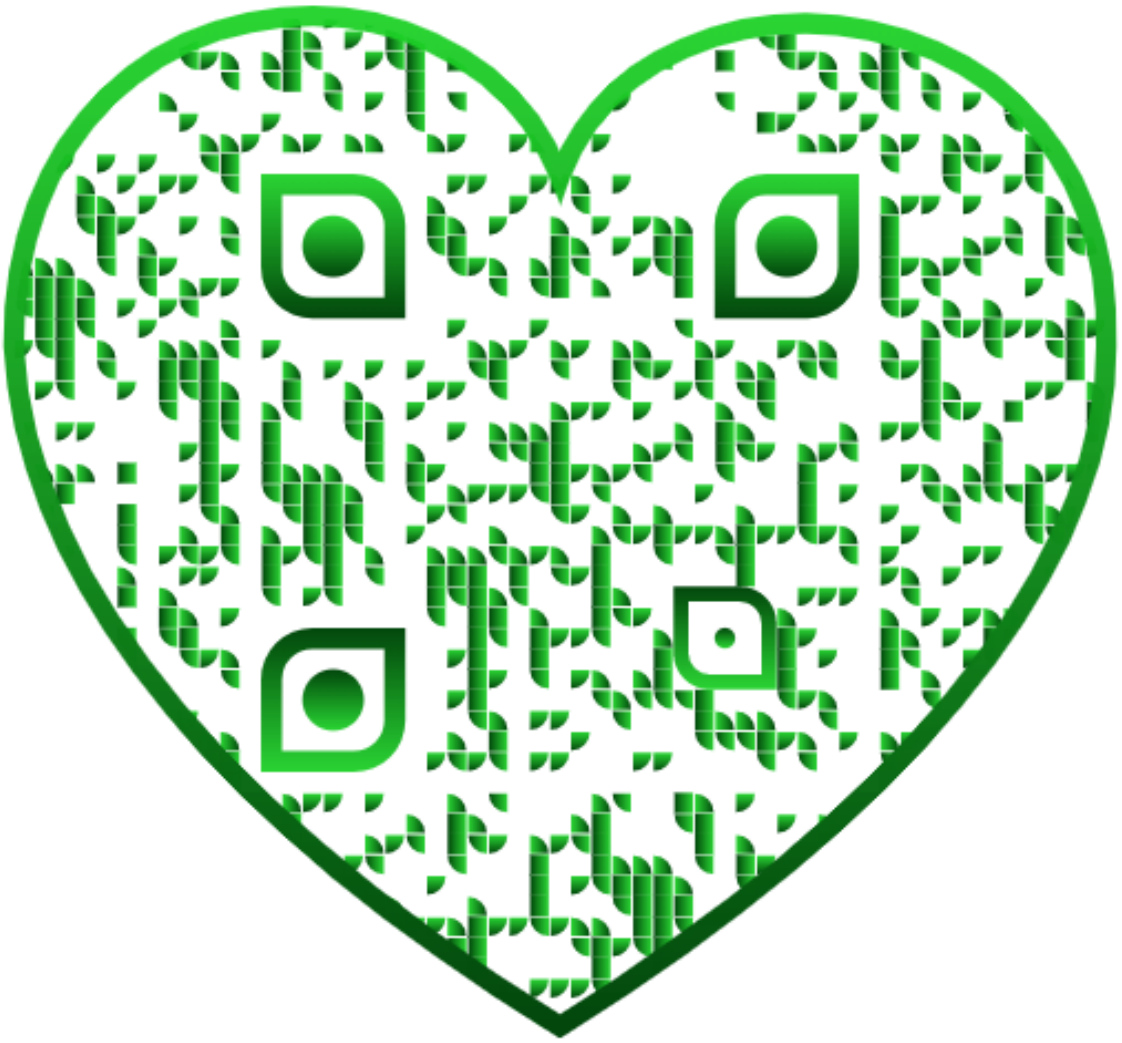
Magico 2023 S3 Loudpeaker

MARCH 2024

$8.99 US / $10.99 CAN

0 74470 64765 2 03>

DISPLAY UNTIL MARCH 25, 2024



Made for You

"Dragon is expensive, but in the context of a reference-quality system, it is indispensable."

– Robert Harley
Editor-in-Chief, *The Absolute Sound*, Issue 331

All AudioQuest products, from our most modest parts to our most ambitious works of art, are meticulously designed to deliver outstanding performance and exceptional value — *regardless of price.*

That's why it brings us so much satisfaction to know *The Absolute Sound* ranks our Dragon ZERO-Tech interconnects among the very best they've ever tested — placing them within both their $5,000 to $10,000 class and among *ne plus ultra* cables that cost $10,000 and more.

No matter how much you invest, AudioQuest is made for you.

audioquest

Contents

ISSUE 347

the absolute sound®
THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

2024 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

p.15

We bring you our top recommendations—complete with mini-reviews—of the very best speakers, amplifiers, DACs, turntables, cartridges, cables, phonostages, integrated amps, desktop audio components, equipment racks, AC power conditioners, accessories, room treatments, books, and more.

Contents

ISSUE 347

the absolute sound

THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

Thomas Tan reviews the Arcam 25 Streaming Integrated Amplifier.

Richard Vandersteen explains the Vandersteen Model Seven XTRM's design in Robert Harley's listening room.

Reed Muse Review

Airforce III Preview - Michael Fremer demonstrates vacuum seal.

YG Talus Speaker Review

Now on *The Absolute Sound* YouTube Channel

MAGICO

Contents

ISSUE 347

the absolute sound
THE JOURNAL OF HIGH-END AUDIO

Departments

8
Letters

10
From the Editor
Robert Harley on the concept of "musicality" in audio systems.

12
Future TAS
New products on the horizon.

208
Q&A
Joe Makkerh, owner and designer of Baetis Audio.

12

Music

188
Dreams So Real
Larry Kelp discusses the musical legacy of the late Carla Bley.

192
The Renaissance Revisited
The Renaissance Band Piffaro plays period music on period instruments and has fun doing so. Peter Burwasser reports.

194
Rock Renaissance Man
Greg Cahill fills us in on some of Steven Wilson's latest projects, including his most recent album, *The Harmony Codex*.

196
The *Sonic Life* of Thurston Moore
Hannah Blanchette on a new memoir that sheds light on Sonic Youth and its influences.

198
Rock, Etc.
Peter Gabriel, Beirut, Andre 3000, Chris Stapleton, James Talley, Chatham County Line, D.C Cross, Sen Morimoto, Teresa James, Darrell Scott, Luke LeBlanc, and Kristin Hayter.

202
Jazz
Ella Fitzgerald, Art Farmer, Steve Davis, Cannonball Adderley, Don Byas, Jason Moran, Terry Riley, Derek Plays Eric, and Archie Shepp.

206
Classical
The Trondheim Symphony Orchestra, the Chamber Symphony of Philadelphia, symphonies by Shostakovich, concertos by Mozart, piano music by Beethoven and Stockhausen, *Symphonie fantastique*, and works written by two composers who were in love with the same woman.

the absolute sound

Editor-in-Chief
Robert Harley
Executive Editor
Jonathan Valin
Acquisitions Manager and Associate Editor
Neil Gader
Editor-at-Large
Michael Fremer
Music Editor
Jeff Wilson
Proofreader
Diana Nagler
Creative Director
Torquil Dewar
Art Director
Shelley Lai
Senior Writers
Anthony H. Cordesman, Wayne Garcia, Robert E. Greene, Jacob Heilbrunn, Andre Jennings, Arthur Lintgen, Tom Martin, Kirk Midtskog, John Nork, Dick Olsher, Andrew Quint, Paul Seydor, Steven Stone, Alan Taffel

Reviewers and Contributing Writers
Duck Baker, Soren Baker, Rives Bird, Hannah Blanchette, Peter Burwasser, Greg Cahill, Matt Clott, Randall Couch, Stephen Estep, Greg Gaston, Jerika Hayes, Drew Kalbach, Muse Kastanovich, Mark Lehman, Sherri Lehman, Ted Libbey, David McGee, Mark Milano, Bill Milkowski, Malgorzata Quinn, Derk Richardson, Pam Torno, Greg Turner

nextscreen
Nextscreen Chairman and CEO
Tom Martin
Publisher
Lance Profyt
Advertising Reps
Cheryl Smith (512) 891-7775
Brian Masamoto (310) 498-5245
Chief Digital Content Officer
Tom Martin
Digital Managing Editor
Charles Kinder
Digital Content Manager
Garrett Whitten
Senior Digital Content Contributors
Cynthia Blankenship, Michael Fremer, Aaron Jenkins, Michael Johnson, Chris Martens, Steven Stone, Andrew Quint, Thomas Tan

Reprints: Contact your advertising sales representative.
Subscriptions, renewals, changes of address: (888) 732-1625 and outside the U.S. (760) 317-2327 or visit theabsolutesound.com
Eleven issues: in the U.S., $29.90; Canada $57.90 GST included); outside North America, $84.90. Payments must be by credit card (VISA, MasterCard, American Express) or U.S. funds drawn on a U.S. bank, with checks payable to NextScreen, LLC.
Address letters to the editor: The Absolute Sound, 2211 Denton Dr, Suite J, Austin, TX 78758. (866) 846-3997; e-mail: rharley@nextscreen.com

Publishing matters: Contact Lance Profyt at the Nextscreen address below or lprofyt@nextscreen.com
Publications Mail Agreement 40600599.
Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses to: Station A, P.O. Box 54, Windsor, ON N9A 6J5.
Nextscreen, LLC, 2211 Denton Dr., Suite J, Austin, TX 78758
(512) 892-8682
tas@nextscreen.com,
info@theabsolutesound.com

©2024 Nextscreen, LLC., Issue 347, March 2024.
The Absolute Sound (ISSN #0097-1138) is published 11 times per year in the months of Jan, Feb, Mar, Apr, May/Jun, Jul/Aug, Fall, Sept, Oct, Nov, Dec, $29.90 per year for U.S. residents,
Nextscreen, LLC, 2211 Denton Dr., Suite J, Austin, TX 78758.
Periodical Postage paid at Austin, Texas, and additional mailing offices.
Canadian publication mail account #1551566
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Absolute Sound, Subscription Services, P.O. Box 1871, Williamsport, PA 17703.
Printed in the USA.

"RICH NEW MEANING"

ROBERT HARLEY, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND, ISSUE 295

BASIS

THE A.J. CONTI TRANSCENDENCE

BASIS

B

BASISAUDIO.COM / 603.889.4776

HAND-BUILT IN THE USA FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS

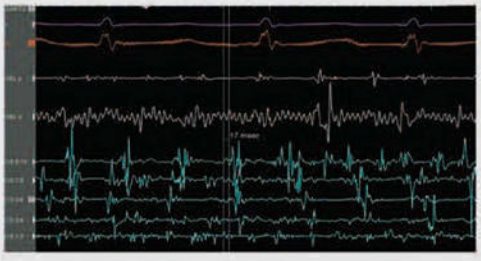
THE DEFINITIVE STATE-OF-THE-ART *in Power Distribution*

Whether judged through the lens of **critical awards**, **measured superiority** in medical labs or **endorsements** from the forefront of the recording industry, Shunyata Research products exhibit **dominant performance in every application where signal resolution is mission-critical**.

GROUNDED IN SCIENCE

12 Unique Patents
Proven Results In Medical Applications Worldwide
Dramatic, Measurable Improvement in Signal Resolution

» BEFORE «



Intercardiac tracings *prior* to Shunyata Research application. 60Hz noise on ABL d. Baseline noise on all CS tracings.

» AFTER «

Intercardiac tracings *after* Shunyata Research application. Zero 60Hz noise on ABL d. Baseline noise on CS tracings gone.

ENDORSED BY STUDIOS

"The difference Shunyata Research products made was night-and-day."

~ Greg Wells, Grammy-winning recording engineer

"Shunyata Research products made a remarkable difference in my reference system... I could not recommend them highly enough."

~ Rick Rubin, eight-time Grammy-winning record producer

2024 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

- Shunyata Altaira CG-NR Hub
- Shunyata Research Alpha XC Power Cable
- Shunyata Research Denali 6000/S v2
- Shunyata Research Everest 8000
- Shunyata Research Omega Ethernet
- Shunyata Research Omega QR Power Cable
- Shunyata Research Omega USB
- Shunyata Research Sigma USB
- Shunyata Research Sigma v2 NR Power Cable
- Shunyata Research Venom Defender
- Shunyata Research Venom V10 NR Digital Power Cable
- Shunyata Research Venom V14 NR Digital Power Cable
- Shunyata Research Venom V14 Power Cable
- Shunyata Sigma v2 Speaker Cable

SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE

...without the high price tag!

GEMINI MODEL-4

Offering a small footprint, this high-current device is capable of powering 200+ watt amplifiers.

GEMINI MODEL-8

The ideal solution for powering entire high-performance audio and video systems.

The affordable Gemini Model-4 and Model-8 power distributors are designed using Shunyata Research's exclusive science, developed for medical and professional recording applications.

Both models include a discrete grounding system based on the award-winning Altaira design, offering even greater resolution and performance!

DT CD™ · CCI™ · NIC™ · Iso Footer · ArNi

See your local Shunyata Research retailer today, schedule an evaluation!

@shunyataresearch // shunyata.com

Letters

Email the Editor: rharley@nextscreen.com or: TAS, 2500 McHale Ct., Ste. A, Austin, Texas 78758

And Thanks to You for Reading

I'd like to take the opportunity to thank you for the tremendous effort you incorporate into each issue of *The Absolute Sound*. As I'm just returning to the family of today's audiophiles, there are aspects of the new technology I do not fully comprehend. Your "expert advice" additions [*in Issue 343's Buyers' Guide*] clearly explain how diverse products, i.e., phonostages, monoblocks, and cables, ensure more faithful reproduction of sound.

Gracious thanks to you, Mr. Harley, along with Tom Martin (in his informative videos,) Jonathan Valin, Michael Fremer, Steven Stone, Andrew Quint, and all the rest of the Senior Writers who produce informative and educational reviews that project a deeper insight of the newest innovations (though at times I must sprint from the room in search of my thesaurus).

The Absolute Sound is the most trustworthy magazine available for today's audiophile to create a closer and cleaner replication of the natural sound.

Thanks for a great magazine and may your readership increase.

J-Claude Drouet

Different Tools for Different Jobs

I enjoyed reading about the CH Precision and PrimaLuna phonostages [*Issue 344*]. I am sure the CH Precision piece is delightful to tinker with, but do the testers believe it is 21 times "better" than the PrimaLuna? I wouldn't buy a PrimaLuna because it is manufactured in China, but otherwise it looks to be a premium design. Why do we never see head-to-head competition?

Kevin H. Park, Esq.

Robert Harley replies: It's a mistake to try to infer a linear relationship between a product's price and its sound quality relative to another product. How does one quantify "x times" better? The buyers for the CH Precision P10 and the PrimaLuna are not the same. Each product serves a valuable, if different, purpose.

Really?

As a devoted reader of *The Absolute Sound* for quite some time, I've often found immense value in the diverse array of high-fidelity equipment showcased within your pages. However, I couldn't help but notice the absence of mention for esteemed companies such as Synergistic Research, known for its exceptional products, despite its noteworthy contributions to the industry.

Could you kindly provide insight into the criteria or considerations guiding the selection of brands and products featured in TAS? I hold great admiration for the publication's discerning taste and comprehensive coverage, which prompts my curiosity about the omission of such reputable companies.

Your perspective on this matter would be greatly appreciated.

Kurt Lassen

Robert Harley replies: That's an excellent question, and one that has important implications for the magazine. Our choice of review products is, collectively over time, a statement of our values and our aesthetic—a reflection of the magazine's ethos.

On a more practical level, we choose a product for review if it has impressed us at a show or in another demonstration; the company has a track record of producing excellent components; the product is technically innovative or intriguing or likely to have high reader interest. The focus is on established companies with dealer networks, but with room for upstart companies that have potential. Today's establishment was yesterday's vanguard, and we want to provide a platform for bringing new brands that are worthy to our readers' attention.

Other criteria include whether the product has adequate U.S. distribution along with the company's longevity. On an issue-by-issue basis, I try to include a mix in every issue of analog sources, digital components, amplification, and loudspeakers, as well as a mix of affordable, mid-priced, and esoteric items. In some cases, a reviewer proposes reviewing a certain product; in other cases, I assign a product to a reviewer.

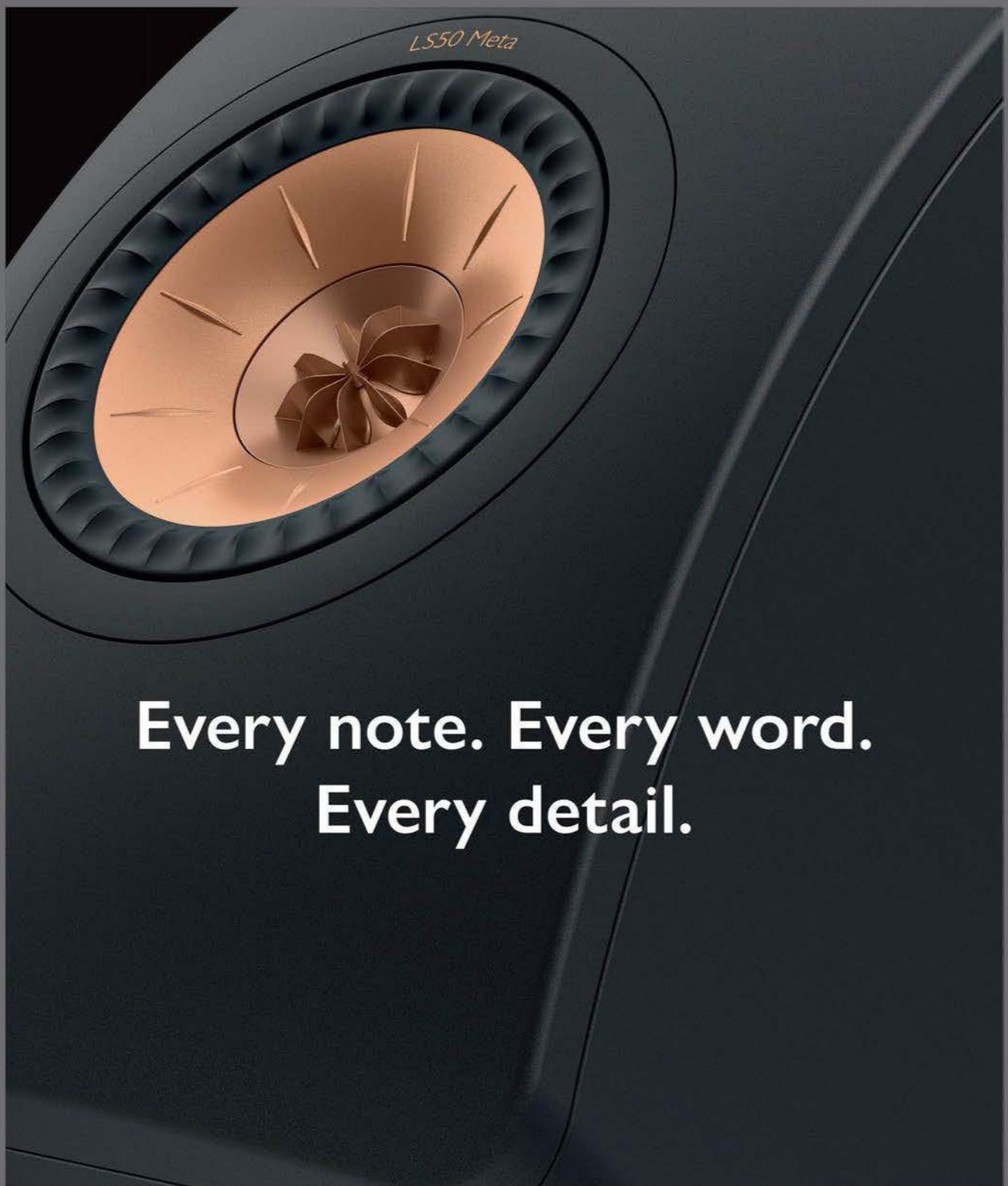
This said, I'm at a loss to understand your perception that we have overlooked Synergistic Research. TAS has reviewed the company's Power Cell (Issue 287), Foundation cable (Issue 304), SRX cable (Issue 333), Atmosphere cable (Issue 280), Element cable (Issue 163), and UEF room treatments (Issue 287), to name a few. The company's SRX was given a Product of the Year Award in 2022, and Jonathan will be reviewing a loom of the updated version of this wire soon.

UPCOMING IN TAS 348

Special Speaker Focus

- **Vandersteen Audio Model Seven XTRM**
- **Magico S3 (new 2023 version)**
- **Wilson Audio Sasha V**
- **GoldenEar T66**
- **Chario Constellation Pegasus MK2**
- **Legacy Focus XD**

Aqua Acoustic Quality Formula DAC, LinQ streamer, Diva CD transport
Cabasse Abyss integrated amplifier with DSP speaker correction
Burmester 175 record player
Gold Note PH-1000 phonostage
Luxman LMC-5 cartridge
DS Audio DS-W3 optical cartridge
HiFi Rose RS150B streaming DAC
Nordost QBASE AC distributor
Vintage hi-fi ads



Every note. Every word. Every detail.

LS50 Meta

Introducing the successors to the iconic LS50. Building on the brilliance of the originals, the LS50 Meta speakers provide an even purer sound, which brings out subtle nuances and details you may never have noticed before. That's because our unique Metamaterial Absorption Technology eliminates the high-frequency distortion inside the speaker. So at last, you can hear music as its creators intended.

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2020
INNOVATION OF THE YEAR
KEF Metamaterial Absorption Technology
WINNER

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2020
STEREO SPEAKERS
KEF LS50 Meta
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

Listen and believe

KEF

From the Editor

Musicality

The word "musicality" is a once-popular term that describes an audio component's ability to engage the listener in musical expression. "Musicality" isn't a single sonic attribute but rather an accumulation of the component's manifold characteristics—a product's gestalt. It has never been precisely defined, instead remaining a nebulous catchall term. The audiophile community has been happy to treat "musicality" as some mystical property that is somehow unknowable and indefinable.

I'd like to see "musicality" return to the lexicon but with a clearer understanding of what it means. In my view, the term expresses a specific combination of sonic attributes that, together, result in an effable perception of connecting with the music. Everyone recognizes musicality when they hear it; it's time we identify what makes one product more "musical" than another. I have some thoughts about what sonic characteristics, when appearing in a specific combination, contribute to this elusive perception.

The association between language and understanding is vital in all fields, but particularly so when attempting to characterize and describe the experience of listening to music through a particular audio component. Precise language allows us not only to express to another person the specific qualities of a product, but also, more importantly, to understand those specific qualities ourselves. Harry Pearson understood this when he began inventing, more than 50 years ago, the language that we use today. Before Harry and *The Absolute Sound*, sonic descriptions were limited to such prosaic terms as "present," "full," "brilliant," and "clear," for examples. One's understanding of how an audio component affects sound quality is understandably primitive when couched in such words. Today, we have an evolving lexicon that expresses such concepts as "tonal density," "image specificity," "continuousness," "inner detail," "pitch articulation," and "transient fidelity," for examples.

Michael Polanyi explores the inextricable bond between language and understanding in his 1958 book *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. He writes of the medical student looking at pulmonary X-rays and listening to the experienced radiologists describing phenomenon that he can't yet see: "And eventually, if he perseveres intelligently, a rich panorama of significant details will be revealed to him; of physiological variations and pathological changes, of scars, of chronic infections and signs of acute disease. He has entered a new world. He still sees only a fraction of what the experts can see, but the pictures are definitely making sense now and so do most of the comments made on them. Thus, at the moment when he has learned the language of pulmonary radiology, the student will also have learned to understand pulmonary radiograms. The two can only happen together. Both halves of the problem set to us by an unintelligible text, referring to an unintelligible subject, jointly guide our efforts to solve them, and they are solved eventually together by discovering a conception which comprises a joint understanding of both the words and the things."

"Musicality" is such an important concept—indeed, it is the *raison d'être* of high-end audio—that it deserves exploration rather than dismissal as some mystical idea beyond our ken. The term has defied description precisely because when we experience musicality, we turn off the analytical dissection and categorization of individual sonic characteristics in favor of the very quality we are experiencing—musical immersion.

But from my experience listening to and describing the sound of many audio components, I've reached the conjecture that musicality is largely the combination of two factors that are very often mutually exclusive. The first factor is ease, that feeling of not being assaulted by the sound. A system that sounds relaxed, however, often fails to engage. The system shaves off a layer of information that robs music of its tonal authenticity, transient speed, and fine detail—qualities that create the illusion of hearing music rather than a recreation of it.

We've all experienced the other extreme, the system with a touch of extra brightness, or a hardness in the upper-mids, or a trace of etch on transient leading edges, or a bit of glare overlaying instrumental timbre. These characteristics, although appealing to some because of the heightening of detail, tend to keep you at arm's length from the music. It's a sound you can admire but not enjoy.

The problem is that the characteristics I've described are often mutually exclusive; high-resolution products are analytical and thus off-putting, and smooth products lack detail and thus discourage engagement. Musicality, in my view, is a system's ability to deliver a more sophisticated type of resolution—the incredibly fine timbral detail that makes an instrument sound real, for just one example—within an overall presentation that doesn't assault the ears. The feeling of ease invites you in, and then the revelation of real musical detail engages you.

At its best, a system that does this makes you abandon any other thoughts and encourages you to jump aboard the thrill ride the musicians are about to take you on.

That's musicality.

Robert Harley

SASHA V™

WILSON AUDIO®

ATC C4 Sub Mk 2 Subwoofer

ATC's C4 subwoofer deploys its latest proprietary 12" SS75-314SC sub-bass driver, powered by a newly developed 300W Class AB amplifier—both elements hand-built and installed in a substantial cabinet at the company's Stroud-based production HQ. The design exploits ATC's signature long-gap/short-coil configuration with an exceptionally long 30mm magnetic gap, surrounded by a 6" N48M neodymium magnet—the most powerful ever assembled by ATC. Two balanced line inputs provide connectivity for stereo or AV/home-cinema systems, while two balanced outputs are available to feed partnering "main" stereo loudspeakers or multiple subs. Low-pass filters are analog, 4th-order Linkwitz-Riley. In addition, an industry-standard 80Hz low-pass filter and an "off" option (for use with external processing) is joined by a polarity switch, variable 180° phase adjustment, and a stepped attenuator over a 21dB range. The cabinet employs 1"-thick panels and heavy bracing. Available in standard Cherry, Black Ash, Walnut, and Oak real-wood veneers, plus optional finishes. **Price: $5999. lonemountainaudio.com**

MoFi Electronics MasterDeck Turntable

Designed by master turntable maker Allen Perkins, the new MoFi Electronics MasterDeck turntable will be manufactured in small batches in the USA at MoFi Electronics' factory located in Ann Arbor. Features include an all-new, dual-pivot, carbon-fiber 10" tonearm with removable headshell. The arm is configurable for virtually any cartridge with adjustments for azimuth, VTA, overhang, and anti-skate. Internal tonearm wiring is from Cardas Audio. The speed controller is optically regulated and uses a three-phase brushless DC drive motor, housed in an isolated container. The 1.75"-thick platter is a high-mass hybrid material constructed exclusively from aluminum and Delrin and sits atop a quality Encapsulated Spiral Groove inverted bearing. The solid wood frame is wrapped around a constrained-layer body of wood and aluminum to eliminate all resonances. Fine speed adjustments (33, 45, and 78rpm) are displayed on a four-digit display. The MasterDeck is supplied with custom anti-vibration feet designed by HRS. **Price: $5995. mofidistribution.com**

Stenheim Alumine Two.Five Loudspeaker

The latest addition to the Swiss company's Alumine range and the first two-way passive floorstander in the Stenheim lineup, the Alumine Two.Five slots between the bookshelf Alumine Two and the floorstanding Alumine Three. The 37"-tall Alumine Two.Five takes the same design concepts of the stand-mount Alumine Two and applies them to a fully aluminum, floorstanding, bass-reflex cabinet for greater internal volume and bass extension. The purity and simplicity that created the success of the Alumine Two is maintained, but the double bass drivers ensure room-filling sound in larger spaces whilst giving greater extension in the low frequencies. The easily driven (93dB sensitivity) Alumine Two.Five is the ideal partner for even modestly powered systems, such as tube amps. It is hand assembled in Switzerland and is designed to perform for decades. **Price: $23,500. stenheim.com**

Genuine GoldenEar

Honoring our rich history while moving boldly forward…

The **T66** — an all-new GoldenEar floorstander with powered bass.

Several important cosmetic and sonic refinements distinguish the new T66 from previous GoldenEar speakers.

These include a dramatically improved crossover design, direction-controlled internal wiring, two sets of binding posts for biwiring, a perforated metal grille, and a sturdy cast-aluminum base.

In addition to GoldenEar's trademark Gloss Black finish, the T66 is also available in a vibrant Santa Barbara Red.

Unmistakably GoldenEar, thoughtfully improved — a speaker to live with and to love.

Available now.

GoldenEar™

WADAX

Different By Design

Reference DAC

2020 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

Reference Server

2022 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

Reference PSU

2023 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

"...the fully realized five-chassis 350+ lb Wadax Reference digital front end... gets you the absolute state of the art in digital replay."

"The fully loaded Wadax digital front end is, in my view, the highest expression of audio art and engineering."

Robert Harley,
The Absolute Sound,
December 2023

AKASA Reference Optical and DC Cables

The Evolution of Excellence

WADAX

Not 'digital' – not 'audio' – just music.

2024 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

Welcome to the 2024 edition of TAS' Editors' Choice Awards, our annual recommended products feature. On the following pages we present the gear that our editors and writers have selected as most worthy of your consideration. These are components that we ourselves would buy—or recommend to friends and family. Each product category is divided into price ranges, with components listed in order of ascending cost (though some items, like accessories, are listed alphabetically). Each recommendation is accompanied by a capsule review, the original reviewer's name or initials, and the issue number the review appeared in. Note that, in some cases, a product may have been reviewed, but the review has not yet been published; in other cases, a product may not have been formally reviewed, but has still earned a recommendation based on the writer's extensive experience with it. Given that this is the high end, where components generally have long lifespans, some of our recommendations look back several years. At the same time, to be as selective and up to date as possible, we have dropped certain components that appeared on last year's list, usually because they have been discontinued, but sometimes because fresh competition has caused us to reconsider the choice. All the products in this feature have been price-checked and their availability in the market confirmed. In addition, we have created a new category, "Preamplifiers with Digital-to-Analog Converters," to accommodate the increasing prevalence of preamplifiers with integral DACs and, sometimes, streaming and networking functions. DACs with a volume control but without analog inputs remain in the DAC category.

DESKTOP LOUDSPEAKERS

Vanatoo Transparent One Encore

$649 Black ($669 in Cherry)

Small, powered, Chromecast- and Bluetooth-enabled speakers like the Vanatoo Transparent One Encores aren't going to replace a traditional hi-fi setup in a mid-sized or larger room, but on the desktop or in a small space they're worth serious consideration, with enough deep bass, midrange clarity, and sparkle in the treble to make them highly enjoyable. Drew Kalbach, 302

Audioengine HD6/HDP6A

$699/$399

Comfortable on a desk or shelf, flanking a flat panel, or out in the room on a pair of stands, the powered, DAC-equipped, Bluetooth-enabled HD6 loudspeaker is a near-complete audio system. It only needs a source as humble as a smartphone to get it up and running. Sonically, this two-way has a forgiving signature in the treble range, and an ear-coddling midrange with a warmer, slightly darker voice that is effective at conveying big sound from a small box. It's hard to imagine a loudspeaker that does more for less. The HDP6A is a passive version of the speaker minus the DAC and amp. Neil Gader, 272

Audience ClairAudient 1+1 V5

$3495

Don't let the 1+1 V5's nearly identical appearance to its predecessors fool you; this newly upgraded version is a huge leap over its already superlative predecessor. The V5 employs a significantly redesigned version of Audience's full-range driver, top-level Au24SX internal wiring, retuned passive radiators, and custom tellurium solderless binding posts. The result is far more resolution and detail (particularly in the treble), superior transparency, wider dynamic expression, and even greater midrange purity. The 1+1 V5's midrange clarity, just one of the virtues of a crossover-less single-driver speaker, is on a par with that of many speakers costing 10 times the V5's price. The state of the art for desktop listening, and a terrific choice as a main speaker in smaller rooms. Robert Harley, 273 (original version; new V5 not yet reviewed)

Sony SA-Z1

$7999

Sony's latest Z Series offering, the SA-Z1, is a nearfield loudspeaker system with built-in amplification, input selection, and a bevy of special sonic-adjustment options. It is a complete system that only requires users to supply an input source or two. The SA-Z1 system does not support headphones or subwoofers; it is a self-contained thing—a complete musical universe unto itself. And what a universe it is, setting a new standard for what small desktop speaker system can do in soundstaging, harmonic purity, dynamic acuity, and low-frequency speed and definition. Steven Stone, 312

Wilson Audio TuneTot

$10,890

Wilson's smallest loudspeaker was designed for a specific task—placement on a shelf or piece of furniture near a room boundary. When the 'Tots are positioned as intended and powered by quality amplification, bass and drums on pop/rock material have satisfying punch; soundstaging and imaging on well-made orchestral recordings are first-rate; and vocal and instrumental sonorities are naturally represented. Deploying the TuneTots in a desktop system is a real possibility—just don't expect to get any work done. Andrew Quint, 287

ACTIVE STAND-MOUNT AND FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

Elac Navis ARB-51

$1999

Elac's active and elegant three-way compact has a rich, full-bodied midrange with a warm, cozy ambience that is ideal for vocals. Fans of choral music will revel in the clarity of massed voices. Overall, the Elac has a weighty, dynamic, bottom-up sound that suggests a speaker that not only doesn't need coddling but dares you to crank it up. A hallmark of Elac's active bass is the way it grabs onto rhythm tracks. This is one of the rare small compacts that you don't have to scale back expectations to enjoy. NG, 291

ATC SCM19A

$6999

The active, two-way tower version of ATC's compact passive cousin, the SCM19, the 19A equals or betters the stand-mount in virtually every sonic criterion. It has better bass extension, but it's the increase in control and pitch definition that truly engages the listener. Images lock in. Its comforting warmth in the lower mids and upper bass adds to the impression of musical scale and substance. Though it may seem pricey at first glance, considering the amps and precision electronics built into each speaker and the studio-grade performance, its true value becomes more evident with every recording. Audiophiles may shrink from active loudspeakers, but the SCM19A makes the case emphatically. NG, 272

ATC SCM50 ASLT

$24,499-$30,499 depending on finish

The tower version of the famed pro monitor, the three-way, floorstanding, active, tri-amplified SCM50 ASLT has no-nonsense ease and neutrality that are underscored by three key properties: one, midrange presence and immediacy; two, midband speed that borders on electrostatic territory; and three, a staggeringly wide dynamic envelope that easily puts electrostatics and most cone loudspeakers of this size to shame. Transient behavior is smooth rather than underlined and exposed for effect. Bass response plummets effortlessly into the mid-thirty-cycle range. Vocals are at times almost voluptuous with harmonic bloom. Is active for everyone? Maybe not. But for enthusiasts willing to open their minds just a bit, ATC should be the first call they make. NG, 290

STAND-MOUNT AND FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

$1000 and under

PSB Alpha P5

$399

The Alpha P5 is a budget mini-monitor with a nicely weighted midrange, non-fatiguing treble, and an overall naturalism that's easy to engage with. Commendably, there is little evidence of the tonal peaks and valleys associated with lesser speakers in its class. Vocals retain a nice blend of physical warmth and clean articulation with hints of airiness in the upper octaves. The ability to fully define the contours of a soundstage are a wee bit beyond its purview; nonetheless, the P5's string section layering, orchestral depth, and image stability outclass much competition in its price class. The Alpha P5 is the essence of what it means to be an entry-level compact in 2020. NG, 306

Elac Uni-Fi 2.0 UB52
$699
Now in its second generation, Uni-Fi's strengths remain securely in place. The midrange weight, forward-leaning energy, and focused imaging continue to make it highly satisfying for vocal reproduction. And its tonal character retains the immediacy and transient attack, rhythmic jump, and midbass oomph that preserve its rock 'n' roll bona fides. But the UB52 conveys a smoother, less edgy sound than the original and removes a soft veiling, revealing more low-level detail, micro-dynamic energy, and soundstage dimensionality. UB52 has taken the well-deserved success of its immediate predecessor and ratcheted up the sonic positives, while minimizing shortcomings. NG, 315

Polk R200
$749
Polk's R200 hits sonic pay dirt at an astounding blue-plate price. By borrowing Polk's own Legend Series transducers and putting them in a minimalist cabinet, this two-way compact cuts right to the heart of the music, with superior tonal balance and seamless coherence paired to a backbone of dynamism and immediacy. As lively as it is natural, the R200 doesn't shrink into the background, tonally or dynamically; nor does it recess images via dips and droops in order to manufacture a fictitious sense of soundstage depth. In low-end response, the R200 takes care of business. Visually, some of the glitter and gloss have been minimized, but the utilitarian design is well-executed. A high-end sleeper in the best sense. NG, 319

PSB Alpha T20
$799
PSB takes budget speakers seriously, and the short-tower, two-way T20 is a serious ground-up redesign. It targets the essentials of musicality first, and everything else falls tunefully into place. A very approachable, high-output effort with an overall sonic character that has a familiar (and welcome) warmish slant, the T20 offers improvements in midrange integrity, dynamic output, and low-level resolution. Driver coherence is also excellent, as per PSB tradition. The low end is solid into the midbass, though perhaps not always as sharply controlled or defined in pitch as one would like. And, yes, staging could be more dimensional, and the top treble is a bit dry (though never dull). The perfect weapon to gobsmack your highfalutin' audio friends. NG, 302

Sonus faber Lumina I
$899
The Sonus faber Lumina I sounds shockingly big despite its very small size. The form factor is attractive and stylish, in keeping with the Sonus faber brand, and the sound is gorgeous, smooth, and deep reaching for such a small bookshelf speaker. Though it works best with a powerful amplifier, the Lumina I can really sing when given the chance. Reviewer DK was absolutely astounded by the big, lush music coming from the Lumina. The soundstage was deep and wide, and instruments felt tight and accurate. The midrange was buttery and delightful, and the upper end had a good bit of luxurious sparkle to keep things interesting. For DK's money, this is the sub-$1k bookshelf speaker to beat. DK, 315

Magnepan LRS+
$995 ($285 for optional stands)
Replacements for and improvements upon Magnepan's two-way, quasi-ribbon LRS (Little Ribbon Loudspeaker), the LRS+ looks almost identical to its predecessor, but its sound is considerably improved in the bottom octaves and the top ones. JV doesn't know what all's been changed (aside from the highly recommended addition of optional stainless-steel feet), but the Plus now goes two octaves lower in the midbass and has a smoother upper midrange. Minus a subwoofer, the Plus won't plumb the lower depths like Maggie's larger panels do, but, sub or no, it no longer roughens up and rolls off the presence and brilliance ranges. A genuine improvement in what was already a standard-setter at its price point, the LRS+ sounds like the real thing from about 60Hz to 12kHz, and that, folks, is not a given, no matter how much you spend. Jonathan Valin, 331

Piega Ace 30
$995
The Piega Ace 30s are "compact loudspeakers," and that's an understatement. At approximately 8.6" tall, 5.5" wide, and 6.2" deep, they're the smallest speakers DK has reviewed to date, and they weigh a mere 6.6 pounds each. DK was delighted by their fit and finish: they're made of aluminum with a curved cabinet and include an AMT ribbon tweeter and a 4.7" (120mm) MDS midrange driver. Despite their diminutive nature, their midrange was luscious, and their treble truly sparkled. Their lower end was tight, though not truly deep (if you love bass, you'll need a subwoofer). The sound was more natural and bigger than you'd expect, though there are limitations inherent in their size. DK, 326

Polk L100
$999
The smallest member of the Legend Series, the L100 offers a level of execution, balance, musicality, and outright thrills that place it in the top of its class. Its personality is one of forthright, effortless musicality—with an ability to convey midrange tonal color and texture with rich naturalness. The L100 has a well-grounded sound, an earthiness that is normally rare in this class of stand-mount monitors. Its treble range is open with realistic transients and extension. Its lively presence range never grows impolite or coarse. The L100 also turns out to be a superior voice speaker, sensitive to the finer nuances of vocal stylings, shadings, and dynamics. Further, it navigates bass solos with acrobatic ease. One classy little two-way. NG, 308

$1000–$2000

DALI Oberon 5
$1300
Stretching the sonic limits in the lower-cost small floorstander category, DALI's three-driver, two-way, bass-reflex Oberon 5 strikes a satisfyingly warmer tonal balance, offering good extension, timing, and well-focused detail. Output is robust with a midrange that provides a wealth of tone color. High frequencies are smooth, although a bit dry, and while the DALI won't quite venture into the bottom octave there is enough oomph in the midbass to imply some grandeur. It's an economical yet formidable speaker that permits users to walk the fine line of everyday practicality, while still allowing their audiophile hearts to lead the way. NG, 297

KEF LS50 Meta
$1599
An upgrade of the original LS50, the LS50 Meta is so named for its innovative internal damping properties. With its pink-gold Uni-Q coincident midrange/tweeter mounted in bulls-eye fashion atop the uniquely arched baffle of its well-crafted high-density enclosure, it

remains as visually arresting as it is sonically satisfying. Meta was a quick-stepping, snappy, and relentlessly musical performer across all genres. Imaging was clean and precise. Neutrality was high, with superb midrange sonics, ample presence, and very little in the way of port coloration. Also, these smallish speakers pumped out shockingly punchy bass that delved deeper than expected while still maintaining composure. Destined to become a classic. NG, 317

Monitor Audio Bronze 500
$1650
The two-and-a-half-way Bronze 500s are extremely nice looking and designed for a wide range of room sizes, shapes, and system budgets. They include a 25mm C-Cam Gold Dome tweeter with a Uniform Dispersion waveguide, and two 8" C-Cam mid/bass drivers. Nominal impedance is listed at 8 ohms and sensitivity at 90dB, which means they won't need a massive amount of power. Sonically, they're packed with lushness—a sound much bigger than their modest size and weight suggest. From delicate strings to solid-bodied bass lines, the Bronze 500s were a consistent pleasure across all genres and formats and should be on the radar of anyone building a new system or looking to upgrade. DK, 327

Audiovector QR1
$1750
The smallest loudspeaker in Audiovector's entry-level QR Series, the QR1's sonic performance was anything but that of a typical compact. Solid through the greater midrange and nicely resolved from the upper-mids well into the harmonic range, the QR1struck a reasonable balance between detail and midrange/midbass density of timbre. While there was a hint of layback in the upper mids, QR1 was no wall flower, either. Effortlessly refined, micro-dynamically alive, and easy on the ears for long stretches without any sense of fatigue, the QR1s had a delicacy on cymbals, openness on brass, and air and sensitivity with violin, either solo or ensemble, that were a pleasure to experience, elevating the overall presentation beyond its price and class. NG, 326

GoldenEar BRX
$1990
The BRX sits at the top rung on the ladder of GoldenEar's Bookshelf Series. This two-way features a silky ribbon tweeter, plus a responsive mid/bass driver that's augmented by a pair of passive planar radiators. Sonically, the BRX seemed nature born to play the classics, with chamber music and jazz possessing the timbral and harmonic complexities and spatial qualities heard in real acoustic settings. Tonally, the BRX communicates a neutral-to-warmish signature with midrange octaves well balanced and rich in texture—a more romantic character that illuminates music and reproduces it with a softer rose complexion. The treble range is effortless—agile and airily transparent in the way ribbon tweeters tend to be. You won't need a golden ear to enjoy this class-leading blend of musicality and refinement. NG, 315

Magnepan .7
$1995
This modestly sized, two-way line-source floorstander uses all quasi-ribbon drivers (as opposed to the mix of quasi-ribbon and planar-magnetic in the [now discontinued] MMG). The result is a superior blend between tweeter and mid/bass, with much better power-and-bass-range speed, low-level resolution, tone color, and extension. Though the .7 benefits on some (large-scale) music from the addition of a subwoofer, all by its lonesome it is shockingly realistic on acoustic instruments (and equally swell on a good deal of rock). JV, 250

Wharfedale Linton
$1999 (includes matching stands, $1499 without stands)
It's easy to fall in love with the traditional hi-fi styling of the Wharfedale Lintons and their gorgeous (and worthwhile) optional stands. The speaker is a three-way bass-reflex design with a 1" soft-dome tweeter, a 5" woven-Kevlar midrange, and an 8" woven-Kevlar woofer. The low end is surprisingly tight and hefty. Drums are impactful and fast with an easy and addictive rhythm, but the Lintons avoid splattery cymbal sheen. The midrange shines with a big clear sound, and maybe just a hint of warmth. The Lintons are speakers for anyone craving classic styling with beautiful, modern sound. DK, 302

$2000–$3000

Sonus faber Lumina III
$2199
The Lumina IIIs are tall, thin towers wrapped in sumptuous leather with a beautifully finished hunk of multilayered wood for their front baffles. Drivers include a 1.15" (29mm) Damped Apex Dome tweeter, a 5.9" (150mm) natural-fiber-and-paper mid/woofer, and two 5.9" paper-pulp cone woofers. Their sensitivity is rated at 89dB, and their nominal impedance is 4 ohms. The Lumina IIIs were revealing and accurate in a way that allowed the music to sound lifelike—no distorted uppers, no booming lowers, no veiled mids. Physically beautiful, compact, forgiving on the ear, easy to set up and place, they sound fantastic. DK, 326

Larsen 4.3
$2400
Like all the Larsen models, the 4.3 is intended for placement against the wall, usually the long wall of the listening room, but not close to the corners, resulting in a half-space radiation pattern which combined with wide dispersion, fills the room with sound but minimizes early reflections. The wall loading makes possible bass that is extended and unusually well defined combined with a striking dynamic capacity for such a small speaker. The Larsen 4.3 should definitely be auditioned if one is shopping in this price range. The phrase "sounds like music" comes to mind. REG, 346

MoFi SourcePoint 8
$2750 ($3299 with stands)
The downsized sibling to the brilliant SP 10, SP 8 boasts a custom-tooled 8" concentric driver and 1.25" soft-dome tweeter. The SP 8 possesses an upfront character with a hint of a romantic streak built into its rich weighty midrange. It offers coherent, of-a-piece imaging and a sibilance range that is held nicely in check. Bass response is forceful, controlled, and accurate in pitch (and doesn't gum up the mids). Hand in hand with its ability to focus images is the SP 8's knack at reproducing a realistic soundstage. The SourcePoint 8 is on any scale a sonically satisfying and impressive loudspeaker. It can match sonics with many *much* pricier compacts. NG, 346

Monitor Audio Silver 300 7G
$2850
The Silver 300 7G is the seventh generation of Monitor Audio's popular and

CrystalCable®

20 YEAR ANNIVERSARY

THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

2024 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

www.crystalcable.com

U.S. inquiries:
Aldo Filippelli - VP of Sales & Business Development
aldo@internationalaudioholding.com

affordably priced Silver Series. The handsome, columnar, midsized three-way was an easy, amiable speaker to settle in with. It had an inviting personality that was warmly energetic, but seriously propulsive when called for. Its romantic midrange was ripe and full. Transients played out as naturalistic—assertive but not strident. Bass response was solid, dipping into the 40Hz range with gusto and, in some instances, going perceivably lower than that. Capable of meeting the demands of symphonic music, the Silver 300 sets a very high standard for a modestly priced floorstander, and with its stylish good looks it can easily slip into a den or living space without necessitating a major design overhaul. NG, 324

Fyne Audio F501
$2875 ($3125 for gloss black or gloss white)
Built in the Tannoy tradition by a cadre of ex-Tannoy employees, the F501 looks and feels like a brilliantly executed, product. Fyne's coaxial driver is built around a rigid cast-aluminum chassis with the tweeter, a titanium dome, located in the throat of the midrange/woofer cone to achieve point-source coherency. The bass response is augmented by a 6" woofer operating up to 250Hz. The F501 is easy to listen to over long sessions. There isn't a hint of gratuitous brightness, though careful front-end matching is required to mitigate a slight upper-midrange dip. It seems to prefer solid-state amplification for best bass performance and delivers outstanding resolution and spectacular imaging. A mighty fine loudspeaker. DO, 304

Harbeth P3ESR XD
$2990–$3190
This latest version of Alan Shaw's subcompact monitor is so cannily designed it almost transcends the limitations of its genre. Neutrality and natural tonal balance reign supreme, but this one can also play loud and descend to depths in the bass. Exceptional driver integration, coherence, and openness also characterize the design. Paul Seydor, 193

Magnepan MG1.7i
$2995
It requires some break-in (to sound its very best), proper positioning, room treatment, and high-current amplification, but when its needs are answered, this three-way, all-quasi-ribbon, dipole floorstander does the one thing that every other loudspeaker attempts to do and generally fails at: makes recorded music sound like the real thing. Exceptionally well-defined, detailed, spacious, and dimensional, it is clear and enjoyably lifelike on virtually every kind of music (though it won't give you the bottommost octave with the slam and extension of the finest cones-in-a-box). "The 1.7i affords a true high-end listening experience for far less cost than sonically competitive speakers," says reviewer JN. John Nork, 313

Watkins Generation 4
$2995
Bill Watkins has been perfecting the compact two-way since the early 1980s, and this is by far his best effort. Mating a 6.5" Peerless woofer with a 1" dome tweeter, the Gen 4's bass extension and control are unheard of in such a small package. Unusually, the woofer is run without a low-pass filter, perhaps contributing to the imaging prowess and transient speed, which are spectacular for any speaker, especially one at this price. Dick Olsher, 278

KEF R11 Meta
$2999
A three-way, bass-reflex floorstander, the R11 has four 5" aluminum woofers and the same size Uni-Q concentric array (5" midrange with 1" vented aluminum-dome tweeter) found in KEF's Reference and Blade speakers. It also has a Tangerine waveguide to improve upper-end frequency dispersion. By design, the KEF R11 delivers a kind of purity or neutrality to the sound that can often reveal finer details that result in greater accuracy and realism—attributes that aren't found every day in more approachably priced speakers. The R11s seemingly play well with various amps and within home-theater setups, as well. But it is their top-to-bottom coherence and even dispersion that helped the R11 sound less like speakers and more like music itself. AQ, 342

$3000–$5000

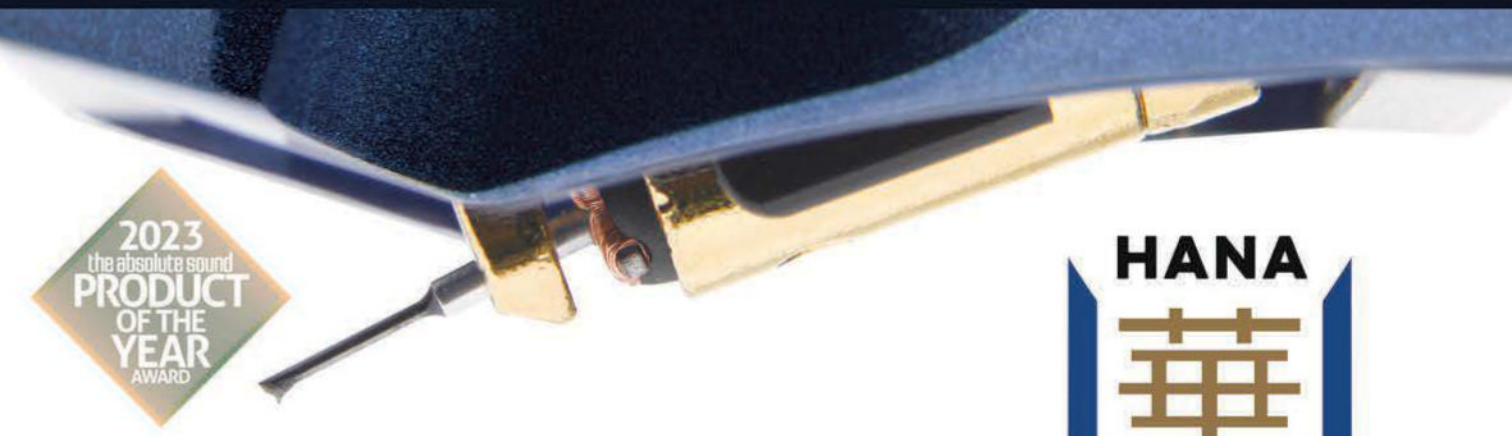
GoldenEar Triton Five
$3000
This may be the Babe Ruth of reasonably priced loudspeaker designs. With the Triton Five Golden Ear has hit yet another one out of the park. The Triton Five is a remarkably low-distortion design that belts out Led Zeppelin but also has the finesse to reproduce the most finely filigreed musical passages. A high-velocity ribbon driver helps account for the purity of the treble. Four side-mounted sub-bass radiators allow it to plumb the depths of the sonic spectrum. Not least, it's also an elegant and unobtrusive-looking design that should appeal to a wide range of listeners. Jacob Heilbrunn, 255

ATC SCM19 V2
$3249
Despite ATC's stellar track record, NG never expected the new and aggressively priced SCM19 to be as good as it is. A superb and superbly defined midrange, overall tonal neutrality, broad-shouldered micro- and macro-dynamics are all in evidence. The surprise is the extent to which the SCM19 outshines its distinguished predecessors—particularly ATC's passive consumer speakers—in voicing and seamless inter-driver coherence. Simply one of the best compacts NG has heard. NG, 245 (original version, V2 not yet reviewed)

Polk L600
$3498
The Polk L600 is an affordable, imposing loudspeakers. It is massive, beautifully designed, and wonderfully finished with woodgrain sides and a smooth baffle. The sound is deep and tight, with a fantastic low end that kicks with real effect. Its midrange is smooth and pleasant, and the high end has a nice sparkle, thanks to the Pinnacle ring tweeter. But it's the realistic bass that makes the L600 stand out: kick drums have surprising weight and impact without becoming muddled, perhaps due to Polk's enhanced Power Port. A real winner, particularly at its price point. DK, 324

Vandersteen Audio Model 2Ce Signature III
$3607 (stands included)
This classic three-way floorstander delivers excellent top-to-bottom balance and

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS CELEBRATES **33 YEARS** OF THE BEST ANALOG GEAR

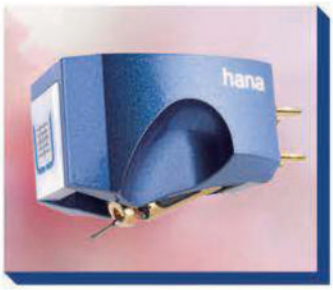


2023 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

HANA

HANA'S UMAMI BLUE

CARTRIDGE OF THE YEAR



HANA AWARDS

Umami Red - Tone Audio 2023
Umami Blue - Tone Audio 2023
Umami Red - Audiophilia Canada 2022
Hana SL - The Absolute Sound 2022
Umami Red - The Absolute Sound 2021
Umami Red - StereoNET Australia 2021
Umami Red - Hi Fi Review Hong Kong 2020
Umami Red - Hifi+ UK 2020
Hana ML - Hifi+ UK 2019
Hana SL - International HiFi Press Awards 2019
Hana SL - Tone Audio 2018
Hana SL - Mono & Stereo Best of 2018

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS 33

EST. 1991 - OAKLAND, CA

MUSICALSURROUNDINGS.COM | 510.547.5006

engaging musicality. Moreover, Vandersteen's baffle-less, time-and-phase-coherent design can suggest the spatial focus usually heard with planars. The 2Ce benefits from bi-wiring and should be placed away from walls. Shane Buettner, 139 (Signature II version reviewed)

MoFi Electronics SourcePoint 10
$3999 (stands $499)
This Andrew Jones design is based on a new concentric driver housed in a 50-liter bass-reflex cabinet capable of 40Hz bass extension. A 10" paper-pulp woofer transitions cleanly to a 1.25" silk-dome tweeter. The SP 10 can deliver sweet harmonic textures with consummate lucidity and transparency, along with a superlative boogie factor. The SP 10 is capable of virtually lighting a fire under the soundstage, delivering dynamic peaks with no apparent compression and successfully connecting the listener with the music's passion and drama. This is not a bright speaker, but the extreme treble range is tipped up, adding a touch of air to the soundstage—an effect which is felicitous of female voice and violin overtones. DO, 338

Paradigm Founder 80F
$3900
A fantastic all-around speaker with the finest sound Muse Kastanovich has ever had in his home and luxurious looks, too. A 2½-way floorstander with 1" AL-MAC tweeter, 6" AL-MAG mid/bass cone, and two more 6" Carbon-X bass cones, the 80F incorporates a wealth of technological, material, and design advancements, including shock-mounted-driver and feet-vibration decoupling, an application-engineered material for each driver type, and a complex non-rectangular cabinet with extensive internal bracing to increase rigidity and break up standing waves. Detail, resolution, and dynamics were all off the scale, and the bass was ample, considering it is the smallest of the Founder series floorstanders. Muse Kastanovich, 324

Spendor A4
$4300
This small two-way floorstander offers surprising bass extension for its size, a smooth and well-defined treble, and an overall extraordinarily flat response. The range from 800Hz up is slightly projected compared to 200–800Hz, but for perfectionists, a small amount of EQ to fix this issue makes the A4 one of the most neutral speakers available at almost any price. The A4 is also an easy load and a natural approach to superb sound at a low price. Elevating the speaker by about six inches gives a more natural listening position. Robert E. Greene, 315

Harbeth C7ES-3 XD
$4490
Over the past three years, Alan Shaw has completed a project of upgrading the entire line of Harbeth loudspeakers to XD ("eXtended definition") status, offering greater transparency, extensive crossover work for better integration of drivers, and RADIAL 2, the latest formulation of Shaw's proprietary polymer driver/diaphragm compound. This latest version of the Compact 7 is over most of its range one of the most neutral transducers PS has heard and unquestionably one of the most musically natural, boasting a truthfulness to voices and the timbre of instruments and a coherence, transparency, and lack of coloration that rival the best in his experience. Its bass extension approaches the bottom octave, albeit at reduced level and power. For its size and design type, this loudspeaker is at once a true reference standard and a music lover's dream. PS, 342

Larsen Model 6.2
$4500
This remarkable floorstander effectively overcomes the room-interaction problems that plague conventional speakers. Specifically, the Model 6.2 is designed to be positioned against a wall rather than out into a room. Rather than coloring the sound and degrading imaging, this placement helps the 6.2 shine, producing a smooth bass balance and a superb soundstage. Even in a hotel-room demo, with the Model 6.2 flanking a dresser, the speaker threw a convincing soundstage. AQ, 276

Sonner Audio Legato Unum
$4750-$5000
The Sonner Legato Unum scored handily in regions that remain the provenance of well-executed two-ways—namely, its emulation of single-driver coherence, spotless pin-point imaging, and ability to convincingly disappear from the performance. The Unum was a portrait of an open, forward-leaning, midrange-centric compact. Predictably, its overall balance was a lighter one—a trait fully consonant with its size and drivers—though its mids were notably full-bodied. Vocals were a strong suit, lively and detailed, particularly with female singers. An engaging, civilized, and musically compelling loudspeaker that makes a strong case for elegance and poise in smaller-room applications. NG, 309

Rogers LS3/5A SE 15-ohm
$4895 (stands $1995)
This BBC-spec mini-monitor is one of the most influential loudspeakers of all time, having inspired a host of imitations since its inception in the 1970s. Its cult status rests primarily on its near-point-source imaging precision. The Special Edition is an attempt to enhance dynamic expressiveness by replacing the thin front baffle with Panzerholz and upgrading drivers and crossover resistors. The result is a major increase in performance. Nothing has been lost in spatial conviction or image focus, but midrange transparency has increased, as has the sensation of compelling emotional tonality. Expect a quality midbass range with extension to about 70Hz. It performs admirably on Baroque music, jazz, and vocals, but it isn't ideal for wide-range orchestral music DO, 331

$5000–$10,000

Alta Audio Alyssa
$5000–$6000, depending on finish
Audiophiles have many choices when they look for a high-resolution loudspeaker that delivers a lot of detail. They can also find many loudspeakers with sunny musical dispositions. But in Steven Stone's experience, a loudspeaker that can deliver high resolution and inner detail yet remain musical in the process is as common as a unicorn. In SS's systems the Alta Alyssa did exactly that. He could listen all day at reference levels without fatigue, and yet never feel as if he were being spared any of the micro-details. SS, 320

Rosso Fiorentino Pienza 2
$5400
Francesco Rubenni is a man to watch. Founder of

Burmester

Power up

111 MUSICCENTER

The 111 features two new upgrades that represent a quantum leap in sound and performance!

The X-AMP 3 UPGRADE and X-AMP + SSD UPGRADE packages deliver a real energy boost, with better speed, increased clarity and improved detail – with the addition of a new one-year warranty.

Delivers significantly enhanced playback quality without compromise, in the Burmester tradition.

SCAN THE QR CODE AND LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR UPGRADE PROGRAM

the Florence-based speaker manufacturer Rosso Fiorentino, Rubenni clearly knows the sound of live music, which he regularly enjoys in his custom-built listening studio/recording venue, La Sala del Rosso. And while his company's wonderful Pienza is most assuredly a mini-monitor, it's no small-fry when it comes to sonic performance. Sporting a 1" silk-dome neodymium tweeter and 5.25" glass-fiber-composite mid/woofer cone, the rear-ported Pienza 2 delivers a large and deep soundstage, plenty of output for small-to-medium rooms, and notably good low-end output for its size. With a lovely, natural tonal balance that convincingly fleshes out instruments and voices and a seductively silky upper end, the Pienza 2 brings a beautiful if slightly romantic tilt to things. Most importantly, it's a powerful communicator of the emotion behind the music. WG, 328

ATC SCM20P
$5499
Born from no-nonsense studio monitor roots, ATC's two-way compact is an honest and sensitively balanced purveyor of music. Critical of poor recordings and laudatory of great ones, there are no unearned or skewed frequency effects, dips, or bumps. Recently it received ATC's newly engineered, dual-suspension soft dome tweeter and this has only made a good thing better. The same commanding presence, fidelity to the source, but with a more expansive transparency, speed and resolving power that adds depth, midrange conviction, and a pillow of air to the upper frequencies. However, at 84dB sensitivity, it is demanding of amplifier power. ATC SCM20P continues to be NG's steadfast two-way compact reference. (Review forthcoming)

Harbeth M30.2 XD
$5990–$6190
The best compact two-way speaker system PS has heard outside of Harbeth's 40.1, the M30.2 boasts high neutrality, superb resolution, and a matching of drivers with respect to sonic character that is equaled by only a small handful of multiple-driver dynamic loudspeakers. Speaking with a single voice in a way reminiscent of Quad ESLs, it is also of vanishingly low coloration and distortion, high transparency, and sheer musical authority, with a ravishing midrange. You can listen to it without fatigue for hours on end. Paul Seydor, 232

Stirling Broadcast LS3/6
$5995
This modernized version of the BBC-licensed LS3/6 (the BBC version of the legendary Spendor BC1) maintains the nearly perfect midrange neutrality and startling stereo imaging of its ancestor but adds much greater dynamic capacity and more extension at the frequency extremes. REG, 228

Bowers & Wilkins 703 S3
$5999
The B&W 703 S3 speakers are a pair of beautifully finished—and fantastic-sounding—3-way, vented, box-style floorstanders, which feature a slightly curved forward baffle, a dedicated Continuum decoupled midrange cone, and two Aerofoil bass cones. They're impeccably styled, stand at 44" tall, and weigh a solid 63.5 pounds each. Their upper range, in particular, sounds crisp, shimmering, and sharp, thanks to the signature decoupled carbon-dome tweeter sitting at the top, a trickle-down from higher in B&W's line. It's a piece of solid-milled aluminum with that swept-back shape meant to limit distortions, and it performs admirably. The midrange is neutral-to-warm, smooth, and extremely pleasant, and the bass is tight without blowing down the doors. Overall, the B&W 703 S3s sounded fantastic playing a wide range of music, from laid-back jazz to big, aggressively complex electronica. DK, 342

Vandersteen Audio 3A Signature
$6351 (stands included)
Like all Vandersteens, the 3A Signature is time-and-phase accurate. Its driver complement features the patented midrange and tweeter used in the vaunted Vandersteen 5. The 3A Signature has a relaxed presentation, is musically seductive, and will appeal to those who want to forget about the sound and enjoy the music, though it does trade-off some dynamic contrast and midrange resolution for its overall ability to involve the listener. RH, 122

Vivid Audio Kaya S12
$6900 (stands $2000/pr.)
Vivid Audio's smallest loudspeaker in its four-model Kaya range, this two-way, ported stand-mount demonstrated the kind of outgoing, uncolored midrange and top end poise and go-for-broke high output to make it one of the biggest little crowd-pleasers to spend time in NG's listening room. Inter-driver coherence was excellent, essentially seamless during critical transitions. Its imaging precision also contributed to making Kaya 12 a richly engaging voice speaker. While true bottom octave bass response was beyond its reach, there was much in the way of satisfying mid and upper-bass response. Few compact two-ways have managed to achieve the overall sense of midrange balance, tonal verisimilitude, and seat-of-the-pants musicality of the Kaya 12. NG, 331

Audiovector R1 Arreté
$7000 (gloss finish, "Piano" $730); Freedom Grounding Concept, $750; stands, $1400)
Audiovector builds all its own drivers in Denmark including the Heil Air-Motion Transformer tweeter of the R1, a design that permits very extended high-frequency reproduction with the acoustic output of a much larger dome. A portion of Audiovector's AMT output is sent backward, enhancing the R1's spatiality. The R1 mates exceptionally well with a good subwoofer, and although it's among the finest stand-mounts to be heard at its price point all by itself, with the addition of a sub you have a three-way, full-range loudspeaker system that, deployed in anything other than a very large room, will beat the pants off any $10k floorstander you'd care to put it up against. AQ, 319

Rosso Fiorentino Elba 2
$7000
This gorgeous Italian-made floorstander sounds as good as it looks. With walnut side panels and a baffle covered in textured leather, the Elba 2 exudes Italian elegance. The two-and-a-half-way Elba 2 features dual 6.5" coated-fiberglass midrange/woofers mated to a silk-dome tweeter. The Elba has remarkable refinement, coherence, resolution, and a flat tonal balance. The tweeter is exceptionally smooth, revealing fine detail without etch. The bottom

The Voice That Is

TIDAL
we build emotions.

REFERENCE. ALL TRANSPARENT.

"Transparency" is an independent variable when it comes to perceived sound quality, and no one does it better than Tidal."

~ Andrew Quint / *The Absolute Sound*
Transparency Defined...Again • January 2024

2024 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

2023 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

REVIEWER the absolute sound REFERENCE

www.thevoicethatis.com
610.359.0189
TIDAL Audio Premium Dealer

Tidal Audio Piano G3 • Contros • Prisma • Intra • Ferios

end has real extension, giving the Elba 2 a sense of weight without bloat. When properly positioned, the Elba 2 is capable of outstanding soundstaging. RH, 315

Cabasse Murano Alto
$7190
A gem of a floorstander—a three-way with a full-bodied and vividly present character and a warmish signature. Not quite full range in bass extension, it proved ideal for medium-sized spaces. The Murano Alto plays it right down the middle, emphasizing midrange energy and output. There are no unsettling frequency droops or upper midrange suck-outs, and its strong power response and off-axis performance lend it the ability to maintain its voicing across a wide soundstage, even for listeners who are outside the sweet spot. In a perfect world it could use a bit more air in the treble and harmonic range, but overall its balance of musicality and polished good looks will appeal to wide variety of enthusiasts. NG, 339

Gradient 1.4
$7650
As in the original Gradient models decades ago, the bass here is generated by a floor-firing woofer, giving half-space directivity. Further up, the mids and highs are produced by a coaxial mid/tweeter assembly in a flow-resistance spherical enclosure, which attenuates the back radiation. The result is a speaker with remarkable indifference to the room around it and an almost uncanny ability to "disappear" as an apparent source. Unusual but elegant in appearance, these relatively small speakers produce abundant sound for rooms of moderate size with excellent balance and superb stereo behavior. REG, 330

Graham Audio LS5/9
$7733
The BBC-designed Graham Audio LS5/9 two-way monitor is an unusual and impressive speaker. It does a startlingly good job of transcending its small size to present large-scale music convincingly. It has a balance very close to neutral and surprising dynamic capacity. And its emphasis on the 50 to 100Hz region (just before its final roll-off) does a good job of providing a full sound, despite the near absence of the bottom octaves. Its imaging is simply correct, and its basic sound very much like actual music, with suitable sources. If you have a need for a small speaker, the Graham Audio LS5/9 is surely an item of extraordinary interest. REG, 270

Larsen Model 8
$7800
The Larsen Model 8 speakers are unusual among floorstanders—they are designed to be placed against the wall, with the wall and floor used as part of the acoustic design, rather than as something to be avoided. This approach to producing sound in rooms grew out of work of the late Stig Carlssen (with whom designer John Larsen worked) decades ago, and the principles remain valid. The profound knowledge of how speakers and rooms interact embodied in the design leads to an unusually convincing presentation of music of all sorts, both small-scaled and large. The concept works; the Larsen Model 8 will deliver exceptional sound in even the most problematic rooms and against-the-wall placements. REG, 251

Totem Acoustic Element Fire V2
$8450
The second generation of Totem's Element Fire is an example of a loudspeaker that plays bigger than its physical size would suggest. Much bigger. Though the dimensions of the enclosure are 8.8" x 16.6" x 11.7" (approximately—the cabinet eschews parallel surfaces) the published low-frequency response specification of 30Hz is quite believable, even with blues, big band, or pipe organ. The Fire V2s will mate nicely with a subwoofer, but it's surprising how infrequently that's mandated. Dynamic life—"jump factor"—is excellent and the speakers maintain their composure with the most complex musical programs. Much of this has to do with the 7" mid/woofer in this two-way, which weighs close to 10 pounds and employs 17 neodymium magnets. Dedicated stands aren't available, but any number of popular 24" ones, preferably with the capacity to be mass-loaded, will work just fine. AQ, 330

Bowers & Wilkins 805 D4
$8500
The 800 D4, takes every element of the vaunted D3 up a notch. All models in Bowers & Wilkins' latest flagship series, including the 805, get a cabinet with more aluminum, a rear-mounted crossover that yields greater internal volume, an elongated "turbine" for the diamond-coated tweeter, handsome leather trim, and a biomimetic (versus fabric) midrange spider mechanism. The resulting sound is pure 800: resolving, musical, and self-effacing. The drivers and cabinet are so quiet that the subtlest musical flourishes emerge. And despite being stand-mounted, the 805 goes surprisingly deep, with satisfying punch and low-end timbral complexity. A terrific value at $8500 per pair. AT, 334

Graham Audio LS5/9f
$8800
The LS5/9f is the floorstanding tower version of the stand-mount Graham LS5/9, both BBC-derived models designed by Derek Hughes. The larger enclosure gives the LS5/9f additional bass extension and dynamic capacity, while sacrificing none of the neutrality and articulation of the LS5/9. The result is a speaker with bass and dynamics that are adequate for orchestral and rock music and with an extraordinary truth to the sound of real instruments. (The extreme top is a little rolled off: Fans of "air" may want to add a super-tweeter). An instant classic that far outperforms its understated appearance. REG, 311

Magnepan MG3.7i
$8995
Maggie's three-way, true-ribbon/quasi-ribbon planar 3.7 successfully addresses three issues that have long plagued "true-ribbon" Maggies: the seamless integration of that ribbon; the retention of detail and dynamic range at relatively low volume levels; and the reduction of "Maggie grain." The solution of these problems combined with the famous virtues of true-ribbon Magnepans produces what is, in JV's opinion, a best buy. Be aware that the 3.7i's are large, power-hungry, and limited in low bass and ultimate SPLs. JV, 221

PSB Synchrony T600
$8999
The T600 is the latest brainchild of longtime PSB designer Paul Barton. It features a tuneful midrange and precise, if limited, bass. The most remarkable aspect of this

The Gryphon Diablo 333

Perfection, Redefined

THE GRYPHON

www.gryphon-audio.com

floorstander is its sweet pellucid treble. A seductive top-end is probably the last thing you would expect from a titanium-dome tweeter, but the T600 sails through complex passages with nary a smidgen of elevated treble. Instead, it's a supremely linear and precise loudspeaker that punches well above its weight. The T600 offers many of the qualities of a fine mini-monitor with more heft and palpability. JHb, 323

Magico A1
$9400 black/$9800 silver
Magico's smallest loudspeaker in the company's entry-level A Series is a return to a 2-way design last seen with the company's Q1 bookshelf/standmount but with updated drivers and crossover—and a substantially *lower* asking price. The 28mm beryllium tweeter is the same found in larger A Series models; the 6.5" mid/bass driver, featuring a layer of XG nanographene bonded to a carbon-fiber membrane, was newly developed for the A1. The speaker manifests the top-to-bottom coherence characteristic of the best 2-ways with a seamless continuity to voices and instruments covered by both transducers. Spatiality is outstanding, as expected with smaller monitors. Bass is clean and substantial: AQ, 342

Monitor Audio Gold 300
$9500
The three-way, four-driver, bass-reflex Monitor Audio Gold 300s really impressed, thanks to their neutrality, powerful presence, and substantial sound output. There was a pleasing solidity to their presentation—courtesy of the cabinet construction and driver technologies—that won us over across more and more source material. Of course, the Gold 300s' "fidelity to source" tendencies tended to reveal both a recording's finesse and flaws. This isn't to say that the 300s ever sounded sterile or analytical, but rather that they generally got out of the way to show you what was there in the recording. This made listening with the Gold 300s a voyage of discovery. If you appreciate or collect well-recorded material, the Monitor Gold 300s will enable you to reap its rewards. JM, 300

Sonner Audio Legato Duo
$9500–$11,900 (depending on finish)
From Boston-based Sonner Audio, Legato Duo offers an invitingly warmish signature that makes music more listenable rather than merely challenging. The mids and treble are faithful to timbre and demonstrate a presence range of fine articulation without veering into forwardness or being prone to sibilant exaggeration. Low-frequency response moderates steeply with a bit of compression but the drivers move a notable amount of air, giving the Legato Duo a heavier footprint than expected. Vocals are a strong suit—balanced, firmly weighted, and reproduced with liveliness. A fine debut and a welcome addition to the high-end neighborhood. NG, 293

Graham Audio LS8/1
$9700
Designed by Derek Hughes, this two-cubic-foot, stand-mounted box speaker, with one mid/bass driver and two tweeters, is the latest of several descendants of the original Spendor BC1, developed by Derek's father, Spencer Hughes. The grand tradition is fully served, but the new speaker takes full advantage of modern driver technology; in particular, it will play much louder than the BC1 and has superior bass behavior. The LS8/1 has a very low level of resonant coloration and an essentially neutral mid and treble balance, with a slight warmth further down. The overall result is remarkably like live music, with suitable recordings. A classic revisited and an instant classic itself. REG, 323

Vandersteen Audio Treo CT
$9995
A loudspeaker of uncommon musicality and precision. Building upon the R&D that went into the flagship Model Seven, the four-driver, medium-scale Treo CT conveys a single-driver-like coherence that immerses the listener in the very moment the recording was captured. It combines uncanny image specificity, color, and texture with an enveloping sense of air and immersion. At least some credit must go to the Model Seven-derived CT (carbon tweeter), which is as transparent and open as it is extended. Basically, a passive version of the Quatro Wood CT, the Treo may not have quite the serious bass slam of that model, but you hardly miss it due to its excellent pitch definition. NG, 262

$10,000–$20,000

Fyne F1-8
$10,500
Fyne Audio's premier standmount speaker features an 8" IsoFlare bass/midrange driver mated to a 1" magnesium-dome compression tweeter, forming a time-aligned coaxial transducer. Its treble range is clean, detailed, and naturally balanced once the Presence Control is properly dialed in. What is nearly magical is its holistic presentation of the musical spectrum. Expect to be drawn into the music aided by a midrange of superb clarity and nearly electrostatic transient speed. And if imaging is a high priority, the F1-8 can generate an exceptionally wide and deep soundstage with precisely focused image outlines. A gem of a loudspeaker that delivers on the promise of a time-aligned point-source design. DO, 320

YG Acoustics Peaks Tor
$10,500 (dedicated stands $1500/pr.)
The Peaks series brings much of YG Acoustics' high-end technology to lower prices. In the Tor, a resin-fiber material is utilized for the enclosure, save for the front baffle, which is still aluminum like YG's pricier offerings. The Tor is the larger of two Peaks stand-mounts, a 2-way employing YG's ForgeCore tweeter and 7" BilletCore woofer machined from a solid block of aluminum. The human voice is exceptionally well-served; bass reproduction is more substantial than might be anticipated from a speaker of this size. The Tors parse timbral and dynamic nuance beautifully and—within reason— enthusiastic volume levels are handled with assurance. AQ, 337

Focal Kanta No2
$10,998
This three-way from Focal's newest lineup provides a significant slice of the technology and performance of the esteemed French maker's top speakers at a more accessible

SILTECH
EST. 1983
Excellence:
From Our Lab
to Your Listening Room
2024
the absolute sound
EDITORS'
CHOICE
AWARDS
www.siltechcables.com
US & Canada distribution by Monarch Systems Ltd.
tel: +1 (720) 399-0072
www.monarch-systems.com
MONARCH
Systems Distribution
MonarchSystemsLtd
Monarchsystemsltd
Systemsmonarch

cost. Imaging is very good, if not holographic. The new IAL3 tweeter acquits itself magnificently by any measure. Likewise, the unraveling of complex high-frequency sonorities is first-rate. The tonal balance is on the bright side of neutral but not to the point of egregiously altering instrumental or vocal signatures. If you have a loudspeaker budget of $11k—and the right amplifier—the Kanta N°2 ought to be on your list of products to hear. AQ, 289

Audio Solutions Figaro L
$11,000–$12,500 depending on finish
In most areas of sonic performance this substantial (154 lbs.), three-way, five-driver loudspeaker, manufactured in Vilnius, Lithuania, achieves well above what's expected at its price point. It plays coherently and authoritatively with music that makes significant dynamic and low-frequency demands, but it is also capable of nuance and detail. With a sensitivity of 92dB and a nominal impedance of 4 ohms, the Figaro L is not a difficult load. The speaker ships with two pairs of front baffles, one with a grille cloth and one without. A steel outrigger base with large adjustable spikes ($650) should be considered an essential accessory. AQ, 304

Legacy Audio Focus SE
$11,962
The massive, six-driver, four-way Focus SE can create a big sound in every sense of the word, while delivering the kind of speed and resolution from the midrange up that is customary in better ribbon and electrostatic speakers, as well as a seamless blend between drivers. The upper mids and treble have life and air, along with a slightly forward midrange perspective. A sensitivity of 94.5dB makes the Focus SE easy to drive. A lot of loudspeaker for the money. AHC, 215

Focal Sopra No1
$11,998
Reviewer Andy Quint wrote this about these superb two-way mini-monitors with articulating cabinets from celebrated French manufacturer Focal: "Perhaps the most telling part of the audiophile loudspeaker review process is what happens when all the critical listening has finished. In many instances, when I feel I'm ready to write, I'll pack up the speakers under consideration and fire up the reference Wilson Duette 2s. With the Sopra N°1s, I felt compelled to hear them play music until the last possible moment." AQ, 266

MartinLogan Impression ESL 11A
$12,000
This hybrid from MartinLogan combines an electrostatic panel with dual 8" woofers—but with a twist. ML has added DSP room correction in the bass, greatly improving pitch definition, transient fidelity, and one's ability to follow bass lines. Compared with its predecessor, the highly regarded Montis, the ESL 11A is a bit more forward and assertive. The virtues for which electrostats are famous are abundant—transient speed, clarity, and resolution of fine detail. PS, 281

GoldenEar Triton Reference
$12,500
GoldenEar's Triton Reference is an extraordinary value for the money. Its built-in subwoofer goes to the lower depth with outstanding realism and detail; the combination of an advanced crossover with a new ribbon tweeter and upper-bass/midrange drivers in an improved layout ensures equally good performance over the rest of the spectrum. A very smooth and musical speaker that is remarkably free of listening fatigue, without any loss of detail or high frequencies, and with an equally good soundstage given proper setup. AHC, 276

Audiovector R3 Arreté
$12,900
The R3 Arreté is a two-and-a-half-way floorstander with an Air-Motion Transformer (AMT) tweeter and two 6.5" mid/woof cones with membranes made of cross-woven Aramid fibers in a sandwich structure. High-frequency reproduction is exceptionally open, extended, and non-fatiguing, most certainly thanks to the AMT tweeter. Bass is taut and tuneful; with most recordings the use of a subwoofer isn't even a consideration. Spatiality and transparency are also first-rate. If detail and neutrality are your things (and you're willing to forgo some sock and body), the R3 is highly recommended. AQ, 305

Dynaudio Confidence 20
$13,000 (includes dedicated stands)
The sole compact two-way in Dynaudio's esteemed Confidence line, the Confidence 20 packs top-tier drivers in superbly designed and executed cabinetry. On hand is uncommon harmonic clarity, imaging finesse, and micro/macrodynamic energy. Its character is defined by smooth balance across the octaves with just a slight suggestion of a midrange-forward tilt. Transient information is imparted with quickness but tempered with naturalism. The tweeter/midwoofer connection is as unified as NG has heard in this type of speaker; bass response is well controlled and vigorously extended into 40Hz range. A key takeaway is an ability to impart the scale and spatiality that are normally the domain of larger, multi-driver designs. In sum, sonically arresting and ultimately irresistible. NG, 345

TAD ME1
$14,500
(ST3 stands $2395/pr)
The Micro Evolution One (ME1) may be the smallest in TAD's Evolution lineup, but this three-way reflex design arguably has more heart and soul than its larger Evolution Series siblings. "Micro" in name only, the ME1's sonics are high energy and potent beyond the speaker's modest footprint. On tap are admirable symphonic scale, and soundstage immersion well outside the norm for a transducer of this specification. The headliner, however, is the coaxial midrange/beryllium tweeter, which offers uncommonly transparent and precise imaging and goose-pimply musical minutiae. What is unexpected are the bare-knuckled dynamic thrust and power range that will shock even the staunchest large speaker advocate. NG, 278

MBL 126
$14,800 (stands $1490)
Marking MBL's entry level for omnidirectional speakers, the Corona Line Radialstrahler 126 three-way contains much of the DNA of its bigger, upper-tier siblings, but brings the cost of acquiring MBL magic way down. The Radialstrahler designs are painstakingly

FONO ACUSTICA
VIRTUOSO
WYNN AUDIO
Distributed by USA & Canada
+1 (212) 826-1111
www.wynnaudio.com
MUSICAL EXPRESSION BEYOND EXPECTATION
www.fono-acustica.com

handcrafted in Deutschland and feature intricately assembled omnidirectional drivers—in the 126 model, the midrange and tweeter—the latter reproducing the sweetest, smoothest upper octaves imaginable with effortless openness, detail, and delicacy, *sans* beaminess, edginess, or harshness. With a pair of 5" push-push woofers inside and a rear port, the 126s also reach deeper into the lower octaves than expected, and overall coherence is exemplary. Rich in reach-out-and-touch resolution and utterly convincing instrumental tones and textures, the 126s work within the room (with proper setup) to create a holographic and immersive listening experience. What's not to love? NG, 320

Yamaha NS-5000
$14,999
The NS-5000 loudspeaker is the star component of Yamaha's new 5000 Series, rightly taking its place as an underpriced overachiever in the high-performance loudspeaker marketplace. The large stand-mount 5000 uses a single material for every vibrating surface—Zylon, one of the strongest fibers in existence. The value of this unique material would be nil had Yamaha not also assembled an engineering team with their eyes focused on the musical prize. But it did. As a result, you will be richly rewarded with a nearly *not-there* transducer. Though Yamaha first used the term "hi-fi" way back in 1954, the NS-5000 is decidedly not hi-fi. It's the kind of product that invites you to settle into an unfiltered, unforced, truly musical experience. Alan Moulton, 308

Sonus faber Maxima Amator
$15,000
A drop-dead gorgeous product, even by Sonus faber standards, the Maxima Amator is a floorstanding version of the Italian manufacturer's popular Minima Amator bookshelf model. This is a two-way design, with a 1.1" silk done tweeter and a 7" mid/woofer joined by Sonus faber's novel "Interactive Fusion Filtering" crossover. Although those who listen to rock and large-scale orchestral music at enthusiastic levels may find low-frequency power and dynamics insufficient for their needs, with most other musical material the exceptionally seamless integration of the two drivers results in a sonic coherency that makes the speakers truly disappear. AQ, 316

Sonus faber Olympica Nova III
$15,000
The new ("Nova") versions of the Sonus faber's Olympica line of loudspeakers utilize a construction technique in which multiple layers of bended wood are set into an aluminum exoskeleton to create an exceptionally rigid enclosure. Within this largely resonance-free environment, users can experiment with the positioning of the top-to-bottom "Stealth Ultraflex" resistive port—aimed toward the center of the room or facing toward the sidewalls—to optimize bass performance. The Nova III's 3-way, 4-driver transducer complement is fully up the task of playing loud and low, as well as scaling down to deal effectively with more nuanced material. AQ, 309

Legacy Audio Focus XD
$15,200
This full-sized, six-driver, four-way model is a lot of speaker for the money—dual powered 12" woofers (with 750W of Class D amplification onboard), dual 7" carbon-fiber mid/bass drivers, a large air-motion transformer (AMT) midrange, and a smaller AMT tweeter. The bass extends below 18Hz (-2dB) and can produce very high sound-pressure levels without strain. You can opt to use the on-board amplification to power the entire speaker or just the woofers. The optional Wavelet processor ($7950) is an outboard preamp/DAC with sophisticated DSP correction that elevates the Focus XD's sound. The midrange and treble are particularly clean and well defined, thanks to the dual AMT drivers. Overall coherence is excellent, with no discontinuity between drivers. AHC, forthcoming

Fleetwood Sound Company DeVille
$15,600
The star attraction here is a solid-wood conical horn with impressive dynamic range. A 1" compression driver covers frequencies to below 2kHz, while an 8" woofer fills in the frequency range below 1500Hz. Listening height is a critical factor to obtaining the most accurate tonal balance. Ideally, your ears should be at the tweeter axis or slightly above it. The midrange is full-bodied and felicitous, while the upper octaves sound just a tad recessed relative to the core of the midrange. At its best, the DeVille is capable of breathtaking transient clarity and soundstage transparency. Its ability to resolve detail in a complex mix is exemplary. High sensitivity (94dB) and a flat impedance curve make it easy to drive. DO's current favorite in the two-way stand-mount category. DO, 309

Larsen Model 9
$16,000
This is the latest and best embodiment of the Larsen concept: using wall placement and woofers near the floor combined with wide dispersion of the higher frequencies to generate a sound with minimal early reflections but impressive uniformity over the room. The sound of your listening room is replaced by the sound of the original recording venue to a surprising extent. The speakers need minimal fuss about exact placement and little or no room treatment to achieve independence of the listening space. The Model 9 is superbly finished and surprisingly compact, considering its bass power and extension. REG, 308

SteinMusic Highline Bobby M
$16,250 (available without the woofers for $8125/pr.)
The Bobby M and its myriad configurations are uniquely striking-looking and wonderfully musical-sounding transducers that make good sense when you break them down—or, rather, when you put them together. Stein's Bobby speakers are modular: The M (for Medium) designation refers to the duo that was reviewed, with one bass extender (with two 6" woofers) under a two-way, bass-reflex monitor with horn-loaded tweeter and 6" cone mid/bass. If you use two bass extenders per channel, with one atop the Bobby S monitor and the second beneath it, you'll have a Bobby L (for Large). Sonically, the High Line Bobby M offered pleasing and smoothly natural musicality and impressive dispersion. JM, 304

T+A Talis S 300
$17,850
From a manufacturer known best in North America for its electronics, digital sources in particular, comes the Talis S 300—a three-way, four-driver floorstander, with solid aluminum enclosure, that excels in all musical genres. The S 300 manifests a complete absence of tonal coloration that makes it easy to discern among similar vocal and instrumental timbres. High-frequency reproduction is open and airy,

WHARFEDALE

DOVEDALE

MADE IN BRITAIN®

Built in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire
The home of British Hi-Fi

Learn More, FInd Them In Person, & Shop Online - WharfedaleUSA.com

and orchestral weight is satisfying. The reproduction of spatial cues is first-rate. The S 300 responds well to bi-wiring; integrating a subwoofer is rarely necessary but possible. AQ, 293

Monitor Audio Platinum 300 3G
$17,900
At $17,900 per pair, these large British floorstanders represent an excellent value—they'll deliver the goods with most genres of music. The substantial enclosure is fabricated from laminated layers of MDF, the front baffle 36mm in thickness. Each speaker sports three retention bolts passing from back to front that the owner can tighten to complement the already substantial anti-resonance properties of the Monitor's cabinet construction. The 300 3G's driver complement includes an Air Motion Transformer (AMT) tweeter, which takes the top end out to 60kHz. The 4" midrange and two 8" woofers feature the latest version of Monitor Audio's RDT (Rigid Diaphragm Technology) sound-producing membrane, a sandwich construction with Nomex, aluminum, and carbon-fiber layers. Not surprisingly, the 300 3Gs are unfazed by large-scale symphonic music and high-energy jazz but will also extract subtle instrumental colorations and dynamic gradations when the recording has them. AQ, 344

Wolf von Langa WVL 12639 SON
$17,995
Loudspeakers built by the German manufacturer Wolf von Langa are among the very few modern products that employ field-coil drivers—a technology that was dominant a century ago. A passive radiator, roughly the same size (11 inches) as the front-firing mid/woofer, is mounted to the rear, and the speaker functions as a dipole. The SON is a two-way design. The high-frequency driver is an air motion transformer made for Wolf von Langa by Mundorf, mounted in a clear Plexiglass panel atop the mid/bass cabinet for free-air operation. Sonically, the WVL 12639 SON belies its modest size, reproducing large-scale music with authority. Dynamics are excellent from top to bottom. With a 94dB sensitivity, the loudspeakers are easy to drive with low-powered (< 20Wpc) tube amplifiers. The integration of the two drivers is seamless, with both vocal and instrumental tonal signatures represented to near perfection. AQ, 334

Acora SRB
$18,750
Acora's entry-level speaker in its top SR series, the SRB, is a 2-way, ported, stand-mounted model, built, like all SR speakers, out of solid granite. The speaker is one of the most revealing AT has ever heard, telling the whole truth of what's on a recording—and nothing but. Try it with any familiar recording, and you're bound to hear some previously unnoticed detail or be better able to distinguish an obscure musical line. At the same time, the SRB's uncompromising nature means that it's not for everyone; if there's a problem with a recording, the Acora won't sugarcoat it. But if you're searching for uncompromising performance—the ultimate in resolution, dynamics, imaging, musically relevant detail, and a surprisingly accomplished low end—in a compact, stand-mounted speaker, the Acora SRB should be on your short list. AT, 337

Harbeth M40.3 XD
$18,990–$20,990
A large three-way that requires stand-mounting, the M40.3 is the virtual embodiment of tonal neutrality, and with a frequency response from 38Hz–20kHz of ±3dB, (but near ruler-flat across most of that range) it possesses an ease, effortlessness, and lack of strain that translate into a listening experience that draws all the attention to the music. Like the M40.2, the M40.3 represents the designer Alan Shaw's highest development so far of the BBC school of speaker design, possessing a sheer musical authority almost nonexistent in PS' previous experience. The M40.3 is now PS' reference when it comes to reproducing music in all its natural power and glory. PS, 269/293/342

Magico S1 Mk II M-Cast
$19,600
There was a time when Magico's enclosures were made primarily of wood; now they're all-aluminum or carbon fiber, every model. For both the S Series and Q Series, Alon Wolf has his "platform" established and continues to advance the performance of the drivers and other components he puts into these optimized enclosures. The two-way, sealed-box Magico S1 Mk II floorstander is indeed as much a Magico as the S7 or the Q7, and must be a top consideration for anyone in the market for a loudspeaker up to $20k. As the saying goes, it "comes from good stock." AQ, 270

Wilson Audio SabrinaX
$19,700
Although significantly more affordable than most of Wilson's other speakers, the SabrinaX unquestionably comes from the same gene pool. Utilizing the Convergent Synergy Mk 5 tweeter from the WAMM Master Chronosonic, the 8" woofer from the Sasha DAW, the binding posts of the XVX, and Wilson's new AudioCapX-WA capacitors first implemented in the XVX, the SabrinaX is a wolf in sheep's clothing. The cabinet is constructed entirely from Wilson's ultra-dense X-material to reduce vibration and noise. The result is a speaker crafted with the same attention to detail as the XVX, and one that conveys a sense of musical truth and beauty remarkable at its price. As expected from a single woofer and smaller cabinet, the SabrinaX lacks the massive low-end authority of Wilson's more expensive offerings, but literally nothing else. Matthew Clott, 317

German Physiks HRS-130
$19,900 to $28,900 (depending on finish)
The Unlimited II's bigger brother combines a carbon-fiber Dicks Dipole Driver (DDD) with a floor-firing 10" woofer. The DDD is a serious attempt to mimic the coherent soundfield produced by a small radially pulsating cylinder. Expect an exceptionally wide sweet spot coupled with palpable image outlines. The HRS-130 is almost perfect for a small-to-medium-sized room, providing that the room is acoustically tuned along the lines of live-end/dead-end to sharpen image focus. Midrange textures are capable of exceptional purity, characterized by low levels of distortion through the upper midrange. DO, 276

R6 ARRETÉ R3 ARRETÉ R1 ARRETÉ QR 1

EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

COLLECTING AWARDS LIKE OUR
SPEAKERS COLLECT COMPLIMENTS.

2024
the absolute sound
EDITORS'
CHOICE
AWARDS

AUDIOVECTOR
Feel the Music

$20,000 and above

Graham LS5/5
$21,190

Based on a loudspeaker originally designed by the British Broadcasting Corporation in the mid-Sixties, the 5/5 is a three-way that, by slot-loading the midrange and woofer for wider, smoother, more even axial response, manages the difficult trick of a uniform frequency response across an approximately 60-degree window, while at the same time realizing state-of-the-art imaging and a commandingly impressive dynamic range. Bass response is deep enough to obviate the need for a subwoofer, while the overall tonal balance is such that day after day on recording after recording over several months the 5/5 left reviewer Paul Seydor feeling he was hearing back to original sources in a way he's experienced with very few speakers. PS judges it the finest three-way, cone-based loudspeaker in his experience and one of the finest, period. PS, 331

Legacy Audio Aeris with Wavelet DSP
$21,477 ($27,792 with Wavelet II upgrade)

The combination of the frequency-and time-domain-optimized four-and-a-half-way Aeris loudspeaker and its companion Wavelet DSP processor/crossover provides some of the most musically realistic sound reviewer AHC has ever encountered. This duo takes digital processing and room correction a vital step forward and show that a DSP'd speaker can reach levels that are even competitive with the best purist speakers, and some that sell for far higher prices. AHC, 269

Magnepan MG20.7
$21,995

These Maggies' magical ability to transport listeners to a different space and time, and to there realistically recreate (with lifelike scope and size) the sound of acoustic instruments and the venue they were recorded in is extraordinary. It almost goes without saying (since these are Magnepans), but the 20.7s are also incredibly good values, although you're going to have to bring a lot of power to this party, and you're going to need a good deal of room to house two speakers the size and width of a couple of NFL linebackers. Don Saltzman, 249

Muraudio SP1
$22,400

This elegant if unusual speaker combines two sealed-box cone woofers above and below Muraudio's unique, doubly curved electrostatic drivers. The curvature of the driver element both horizontally and vertically generates an effect resembling a virtual point source rather than sounding like a typical flat panel. The SP1 is very clean with extremely low distortion. The bass is very well integrated and precise in character, albeit not extended to the lowest lows. The spatial impression is attractively unconstrained, and the balance is overall neutral. Muraudio became famous a few years ago for its omni PX1 model, which used three doubly curved panels to form a 360-degree source. But the SP1, at a much lower and very reasonable price for what is involved, is a truly exceptional speaker in its own right. REG, 293

Crystal Cable Minissimo Forte
$24,000 (Scala $1400)

The Minissimo Forte is the best Minissimo yet. The unique apostrophe shape of the 2-way loudspeaker's enclosure remains, and there's still an integral stand. What's very different is the crossover, described as "semi-active balanced second order." AC powers a buffer amplifier inserted between the crossover and drivers. (A pair of sleek Crystal Cable power cords is supplied.) As a result, the crossover needs no inductor coil—distortion is reduced, and dynamics improve. Reproduction of the human voice is exceptional, and bass is surprisingly prodigious for a speaker of this size. The beautifully machined aluminum Scala "top hat" ($1400) that sits atop the speaker and further improves image focus is optional, but really should be considered essential. AQ, 346

Raidho TD1.2
$24,000, piano black; $27,000, walnut

This wonderful mini-monitor plays music with a lot more dynamic impact, control, and sonic heft than it should be able to muster given its size. Its robust sound could easily be mistaken for that of a small-to-medium floorstander. It recreates a large, airy soundscape filled with well-defined images in a coherent contextual whole. High resolution without sounding forced is the TD1.2's main strength. One has a feeling of peering into the recording event, so well does it portray fine details. It also allows all kinds of music to retain their verve and beauty, and thereby makes listening a real pleasure. It is limited in low-frequency extension and dynamic range, as all mini-monitors are, and it is expensive. The TD1.2 is for the enthusiast of fine mini-monitors, who appreciates the strengths—and accepts the weaknesses—of the genre and is willing to acquire one of the best available. Kirk Midtskog, 304

MBL 120
$26,500 (stands $2080)

The omnidirectional MBL 120 has been specially engineered for medium-sized rooms—and in such environs it sounds fabulous. The soundstage it throws has never been more holographic or enveloping. More extended across the frequency spectrum and far less colored in the bass than the 121, it is a more refined speaker in every category. The best small MBL yet. NG, 228

Magico A5
$26,800

Magico's A5 brings the company's vaunted technologies to a less lofty price point. The A5 is a three-way, five-driver system in a sealed, anodized-aluminum enclosure that features materials and construction techniques previously implemented in Magico's top Q series. The result is a speaker that offers crisp, tight extension down to 24Hz, staggering dynamics for its size, and a lifelike sense of weight and body. The overall presentation is triumphantly cohesive; image accuracy and presence are meticulous. The A5 offers micro-resolution, yet never sounds analytical. A terrific speaker and a great value. MC, 320

Kharma Elegance S7 Signature
$28,000

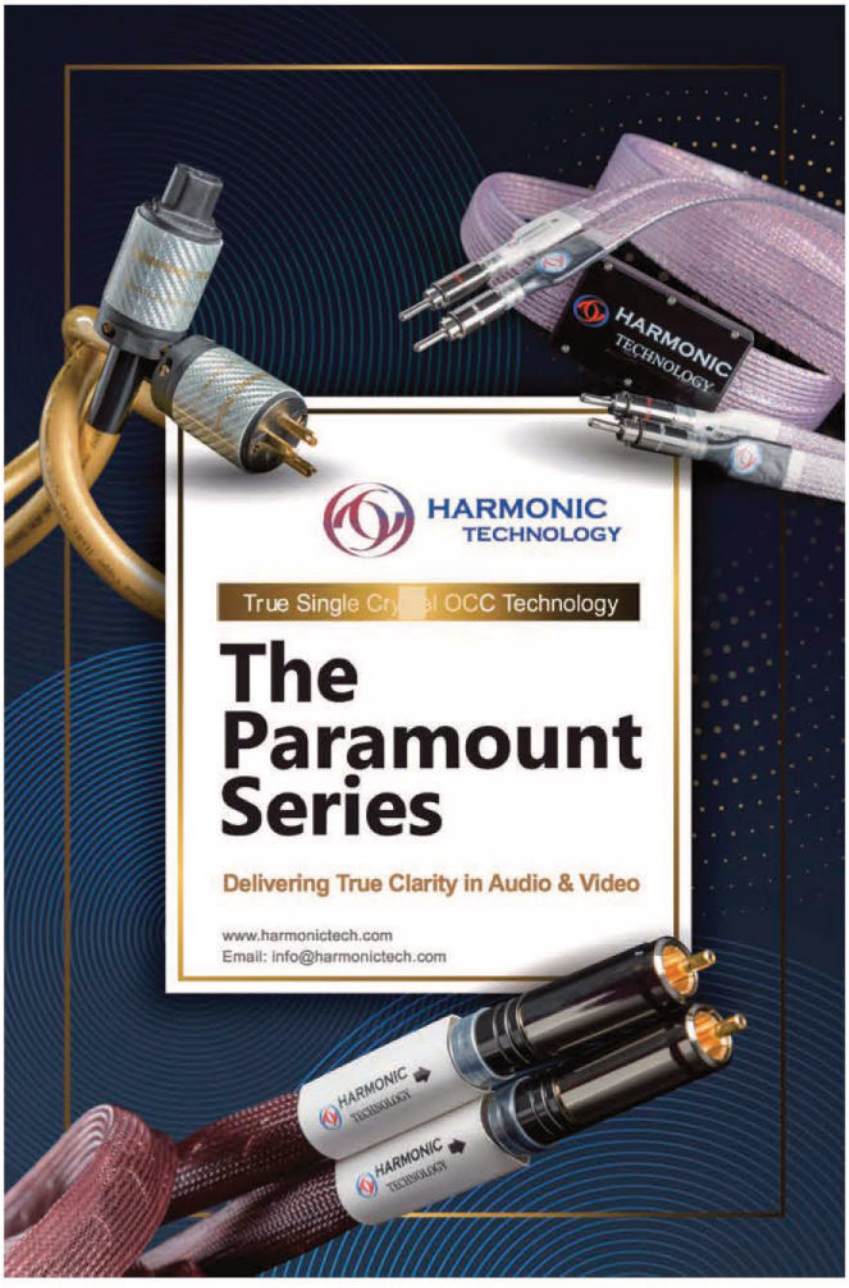
A loudspeaker for connoisseurs who appreciate the finest the high end can offer. The look is sumptuous, the

VITUS AUDIO
FOREVER NOW
MUTE
vitusaudio.com

quality of materials stunning, and the mirror-like finish breathtaking. But it's the sound that truly seduces—ripe with detail and harmonic complexity. Credit is due to the beryllium tweeter, which makes a great match with Kharma's proprietary composite (KCD) woofers (goodbye to Accuton ceramic drivers). Ideal for smaller to medium-sized rooms, yet so potent in output and midbass thrust it's easy to forget it's a mere two-way. Like all Kharma speakers it has a delicacy, low-level resolving power, and micro-dynamic dexterity that touch both the mind and the heart. NG, 253

PS Audio FR30
$28,499

After nearly 50 years in the electronics business, PS Audio has released a speaker—and it's a great one. The drivers are all custom-made for the FR30 and include two innovative planar-magnetic transducers—a 10" midrange and two 2.5" tweeters. Four 8" woofers augmented by four 10" side-firing passive radiators add bottom-end firepower. The oval enclosure sits on a platform that raises it from the floor, giving the FR30 a distinctive appearance. This formidable driver array produced some of the smoothest, best integrated, and musically realistic bass AHC has heard. But the midrange and treble reproduction from those large planar-magnetic drivers were the stars of the show. There was more detail at every level of sound, particularly on low-level passages that faded away into silence. AHC, 331



Estelon YB Mk II
$29,000

Estelon's least-expensive full-range loudspeaker manifests all the virtues of the Estonian manufacturer's most ambitious products, including a uniquely shaped enclosure fabricated from a proprietary marble composite material. In this non-resonant cabinet, the YB Mk II's three drivers—a ScanSpeak 1" beryllium dome, a ScanSpeak 5.8" sliced-paper cone mid/woofer, and a SEAS 8.6" aluminum woofer, all basically off-the-shelf parts—function optimally. The Estelons spatiality may be their strongest selling point. The speakers also excel at the reproduction of the human voice. Unquestionably, the YB Mk IIs function best with substantial high-current amplifiers, which provide all the low-end heft and "grip" they're capable of. The speaker's appearance is stunning, winning the YB model a prestigious Red Dot international design award in 2017. AQ, 320

YG Acoustics Carmel 3
$29,800

Much of YG's technology from its higher-end offerings found a place in this two-way, floorstander, along with standard YG features like a solid-aluminum sealed enclosure, proprietary anti-resonance devices, and world-class fit and finish. The result is a slender package with a surprisingly big, lively sound and an ability to delve deeper than you'd expect. The highs are more extended (an airy 40kHz) than a typical soft-dome tweeter, with the benefit of no metallic glare. Imaging, tonality, detail, and dynamics are all at a bespoke level. Musically, the speaker is an unending delight. The YG also fits perfectly into today's smaller, shared-purpose listening spaces. The speaker is stylish enough to complement any décor, is perfectly happy tucked out of the way near the wall behind it, doesn't require humongous amps, and sounds great even at low volume. AT, 320

TAD Evolution One TX
$30,500

Standing roughly four feet tall on its spiked outrigger base, this 3-way bass-reflex design features a 1" beryllium dome tweeter that is mounted coaxially within a 3.5" mid-

range cone, making for a better off-axis listening experience. Two 6." woofers with membranes fabricated from a laminated material of aramid fabric and raw fibers complete the driver complement. All the transducers are made from scratch by TAD. Slit-shaped ports on both lateral surfaces of the Evolution One TX contribute to the flexibility in room placement that characterizes the speaker—it will perform well just a foot-and-a-half from the room boundary behind it. Scaling of musical forces, layered depth, and timbral accuracy are all excellent. AQ, 328

German Physiks Borderland Mk IV
$32,800 to $40,600 (depending on finish)
Finding an omni-directional speaker that works in real-world rooms can be a challenge. Finding one that is simple to set up, somewhat affordable, relatively easy to drive and sounds like music is near impossible. Yet German Physiks' Borderland Mk IV, with its Dicks Dipole Driver (DDD) omnidirectional transducer mated to a 12" down-firing woofer in a sealed enclosure accomplishes just that. The Borderland offers a sense of live music that few other speakers convey. With a single driver reproducing the frequencies from 190Hz to 24kHz, the speaker represents a near acoustic point source, creating a holographic stage that is both palpable and believable. And that 12" sealed driver truly brings the goods while never losing its grip or unraveling. The buyer needs to decide if the unorthodox appearance is suited to their taste. DO, 316

Dynaudio Confidence 50
$33,500
For listeners who want their music to scale up convincingly but must deploy an audio system in a typical moderately sized domestic space, the Confidence 50 should be under strong consideration. By any standard, the Confidence 50 is a big loudspeaker, 59½" tall and close to 110 pounds, a three-way, five-driver design with bass extension down to 35Hz -3dB. The driver complement includes the latest iteration of Dynaudio's Esotar soft-dome tweeter plus pairs of 6" midrange cones and 7" woofers above and below, all of which utilize the company's proprietary Magnesium Silicate Polymer membrane material. The Confidence 50s impress as much with smaller scale music as with Mahler and Metallica. Subtleties in phrasing and dynamic inflections by a string quartet or shifts in tone color by a jazz vocalists register effortlessly. AQ, 338

Stenheim Alumine Three
$33,950
The new 3½-way "compact reference" loudspeaker from the relatively young Swiss company Stenheim is an explosive musical launchpad that brings a set of strengths to the market that is frankly unique in one small (but 150-pound-heavy) package. An unusually high 93dB sensitivity with a nominal 8-ohm impedance (6 ohms minimum) opens the window of usable amplification. Imagine the presence and energy of your favorite horn loudspeaker (but without the unpleasant colorations) squeezed into a small, attractive aluminum enclosure that can fit in your small to medium-sized listening room. AM, 304

Acora SRC-1
$35,000
The Acora SRC-1 is a new product from a new company. This is a high-end loudspeaker with a stone enclosure that succeeds in all important audiophile metrics. CNC technology allows for the eight pieces of granite that comprise each cabinet to be cut to the exacting tolerances required so that they fit together perfectly and function as they should acoustically. A ported, surprisingly svelte, 246-pound two-way floorstander, the SRC-1 uses a 1" soft dome tweeter and a 7" sandwich paper-cone woofer, sourced from ScanSpeak and rebuilt by Acora in Toronto. The presentation of musically meaningful detail is the SRC-1's major strength, as is its rendering of image size and recording space. Bass is tuneful, with good impact. Orchestral climaxes are majestic, most certainly because nothing is vibrating that shouldn't be. An instant classic. AQ, 308

Audiovector R6 Arreté
$35,100
The Audiovector R6 Arreté uses the advanced technology created for the R8 and Flagship R11 Arreté in a "more affordable" package designed for smaller rooms. A six-driver floorstander, the R6 includes an AMT tweeter, rear-firing 3" midrange, two 6.5" front-firing carbon-fiber midrange drivers, and an isobaric-loaded woofer, implementing a

6.5" and 8" woofer. The sonic character of the R6 Arreté can be generally described as unconstrained and accurate, with an emphasis on resolution and natural detail. It's not that there is more there; it's just that the definition of what's there is cleaner, crisper, and more resolved. Add to that an almost magically neutral midrange of miraculous speed and you begin to get the idea. Low frequencies are fast paced and articulate to match the speed and accuracy up top. If you favor detail, dimensionality, clarity, and scale, then these speakers need to be on your list. MC, 313

Paradigm Persona 9H
$37,000
Along with the Legacy speakers, the Persona 9H is a product from one of only two manufacturers AHC has found that can really do room correction well. The Persona line features the excellent Anthem Room Correction (ARC) to remove room-induced peaks and dips. The 9H is truly flat (±2dB 19Hz–45kHz), has very deep, quick, and detailed bass, and a superb new beryllium midrange driver and beryllium tweeter with a great deal of life and detail but no hardness. Each woofer is driven by a DSP-controlled 700W amplifier. With excellent driver integration and something much closer to a point-source sound than most complex speaker systems, the 9H provides some of the best imaging and soundstage performance at any price, and its size and weight are far more practical than that of many contenders for the state of the art. AHC, 272

Bowers & Wilkins 801 D4
$38,000
The fourth generation of this iconic loudspeaker continues the development of a product that was advanced for its time when introduced 43 years ago. In addition to the "reverse wrap" enclosure design first seen with the D3 iteration, the current 801 has a reconsidered internal Matrix construction to further control unwanted resonances. Also new is B&W's Biomimetic Suspension System that improves the mechanical behavior of the midrange driver's spider, and the woofers now sport anti-resonance plugs to reduce flexing. These changes, and other refinements, result in a loudspeaker that's fearless when it comes to dynamics and low-frequency reproduction, but also delivers all the spatial and tonal subtleties of the best recordings. AQ, 325

Rockport Technologies Atria II
$38,000
The Atria embodies the best in modern speaker design. Its vanishingly low distortion leads to uncanny levels of purity and resolution, while also making the speaker easy to listen to. The Atria is also highly coherent, speaking with one voice—a voice that disappears as a source and can throw a soundstage so deep it's spooky. Surprisingly in this size and price range, this speaker has plenty of bass heft and dynamic range to spare. All these elements come together effortlessly, creating an experience that will hold you in its spell. A terrific speaker and a great value, too. AT, 241

Vandersteen Audio Kento Carbon
$41,700
After a long and hugely successful run, Vandersteen's Model 5 has been replaced with the significantly improved Kento Carbon. This four-way, five-driver system features two side-firing 9" woofers powered by an integral amplifier, a 6.5" tri-woven mid/woofer, Vandersteen's 4.5" Perfect Piston midrange, and the company's unique 1" carbon tweeter. An 11-band analog-equalization system allows you to flatten the in-room response below 200Hz. The first-order crossovers and slanted baffle assure that the Kento is phase-coherent at the listening position. Sonically, the Kento is remarkably coherent from top-to-bottom, speaking with one voice. Bass is excellent, with outstanding clarity, aided by the ability to fine-tune the bottom end to your room. More than a worthy successor to the venerable Model 5. Andre Jennings, 312

Magnepan MG30.7
$43,995
This giant, four-panel (two panels per side), four-way, ribbon/quasi-ribbon line source loudspeaker from Magnepan is the best Maggie JV has heard. With its highly coherent wavelaunch, free-standing imaging, vast soundstage, phenomenal resolution of inner detail, lightning transient response, incomparable naturalness of timbre, and total lack of box coloration and diffraction, the 30.7 is markedly less "there" as a sound source (and markedly more lifelike on voice and acoustic instruments) than almost every dynamic-speaker-in-a-box, no matter its price. The best buy in an ultra-high-end loudspeaker (and one of the best high-end buys of all time), the 30.7 earned JV's most ecstatic recommendation and TAS' 2017 Overall Product of the Year award. JV, 279

Joseph Audio Pearl 20/20 Graphene
$43,999
The Pearl 20/20 Graphene floorstander comprises two modular sections. The lower half contains twin 8" woofers, and the upper module contains a 7" graphene-coated midrange and 1" Sonatex tweeter. When combined, the two sections form the complete speaker. The Pearl 20/20 Graphene further improves upon the sound of Joseph Audio's excellent smaller Perspective2 Graphene, especially in the bass with additional power and extension. New FEA advancements in the graphene midrange and subsequent crossover adjustments have yielded a transducer with solid imaging, great soundstaging, excellent clarity, and a stress-free yet detailed presentation. AJ, 309

Magico 2023 S3
$45,500
In a world of huge six- and seven-digit loudspeakers, it may seem odd to nominate a demure $45k transducer for a Product of the Year Award. How Alon Wolf & Co. have managed to make this relatively affordable, modestly sized, aluminum-enclosed, four-driver (1.1" diamond-coated beryllium tweeter, 5" Gen 8 aluminum/graphene/carbon-fiber midrange, two 9" Gen 8 graphene woofers), three-way floorstander into something that competes with the very best on the market (for a good deal less) is a wonderment. Wolf says the 2023 S3 is the first fruit of the painstaking research and fresh technology that went into creating his flagship M9, and it certainly sounds different (and better) than any previous Magico JV has reviewed (including several of the M Series speakers). For one thing, the S3 has incredible bass—color, power, resolution, and extension down to a true 20Hz. This sensational foundation gives the S3 an overall warmth of timbre that is relatively new to Magicos—and simply delightful to hear. The knock against Wolf's products (at least, for a jaded few) has always been a very un-Wilson-like mid-to-low-bass linearity that robs music (or so it is claimed) of some of its beauty and impact. One

Refined elegance meets uncompromised performance. The new generation of Imagine Series featuring the B50 Bookshelf, T54 and T65 Tower, are crafted with sleek minimalist cabinets and world-class driver technologies to deliver incredibly detailed acoustics. A sophisticated style at an incredible value, the Imagine Series brings PSB's true-to-nature sound together with a beautiful design for every listener.

listen to this number, and that reservation goes out the window. You might think, as Robert Harley has observed, that such a full-range sonic triumph ought to cost $100k or more. That it is priced at $45k is the icing on a delectable cake. JV, forthcoming

Raidho TD2.2
$46,500
To say the TD2.2 adds a reasonable measure of bass weight and extension to the overall sound of its smaller sibling, the fabulously high-performing TD1.2 mini-monitor, would be an understatement. The rear-ported, 2.5-way TD2.2 sounds much grander in scale and impact than its seemingly modest differences would lead one to expect. The TD2.2 delivers fatigue-free high resolution in the top end and midrange, coupled with satisfying fullness in the low end. Add in expansive soundstaging and focused imaging, and you have a very easy-to-like transducer. Raidho uses its own in-house drivers—one TD ribbon tweeter and two 6.5" mid/woofers layered with five thin coats of tantalum and industrial diamond on an aluminum cone. Music sparkles through the TD2.2. It invites you to listen closely. KM, 331

Wilson Sasha V
$48,900
The latest version of Wilson's popular mid-range speaker is a fortuitous confluence of DNA from its big brother, the flagship Chronosonic XVX, and genes passed down through the decades dating back to the original WATT/Puppy. As such, its design is both cutting edge and tried and true. Sonically, the Sasha V inspires confidence: confidence that when you cue up a track you are going to hear every little detail, every timbral nuance, and every musical expression. The speaker's imaging puts everything in its right place, and highs are sufficiently extended to lend plenty of air to the soundstage. Finally, bass is stellar: deep, rich, and varied. Materials and finish are up to Wilson's usual standard of excellence. AT, forthcoming

Estelon XB Mk II
$49,000
The curvaceous cabinet is only the beginning of the XB's delights. The Estelon delivers incredible detail and spatial resolution, giving music an uncanny tangibility. Further, dynamics and timing are so precise—allowing stylistic nuances to come through so clearly—that the listener feels directly connected to each musician. The trade-offs for these manifest benefits are low sensitivity and a tweeter that skirts the edge of aggressiveness. The XB should be paired with brawny amps, installed on their included spikes, and positioned with minimal toe-in to minimize these effects. (New Mk II version not yet reviewed.) AT, 253

Voxativ 9.87
$49,990
The horn-loaded Voxativ 9.87 has advantages that neither planar nor dynamic speakers offer. First, it is very high in sensitivity, which allows you to drive it to thunderous levels with an SET or lower-powered amp. Second, it is a single-driver speaker, using one Voxativ 8", wooden-cone, AC-4D widebander to cover almost the entire audible range. Third, it is augmented in the bass by an amplified dipolar subwoofer, the Pi-Bass. As a result, the 9.87 doesn't thin down and roll off in the low end and lower midrange as other single-driver loudspeakers do. It has the body, power, and extension that are almost always missing in such designs, making it the most complete and realistic-sounding single-driver transducer JV has heard. JV, 289

T+A Solitaire S540
$54,000
This three-way speaker features four 8.5" side-firing woofers per speaker in an opposed array, seven 3.5" x 2.4" oval midrange drivers in a line-source array, and the star of the show, an in-house developed 33" planar-magnetic tweeter. The S540, by design, has a very narrow horizontal and vertical dispersion, resulting in more direct sound at the listening position and less interfering reflected energy. Listening to the S540, it's immediately apparent that this is a planar design, with that unmistakable immediacy, resolution, coherence, and presence that comes so easily to planar-magnetic drivers. The S540's midrange and treble resolution is simply phenomenal. The planar-magnet tweeter, crossed over at a very low 1.8kHz, is a spectacularly great transducer. The narrow dispersion results in extremely precise localization of images. The bass is well balanced, resulting in an extremely engaging and satisfying listening experience. RH, 344

Legacy Audio V with Wavelet II Processor
$55,000
This digitally optimized, multiway floorstander with a highly sophisticated processor is one of the best speaker systems AHC has heard—one of those rare innovative approaches to high-end audio that is so good it almost compels serious audiophiles to audition it. AHC was truly impressed with what the Legacy V could do in making subtle improvements in the realism of imaging and depth, and the smoothness and clarity of the bass with a wide range of classical music and acoustic jazz. The Legacy V does have some truly great competition from speakers without any of the features of the Wavelet II processor, but to quote AHC's conclusion, "The Legacy V is really good!" AHC, 258

Vimberg Tonda D
$63,000
Designed and built by the same folks who make ultra-high-end Tidal Audio loudspeakers, the Vimberg line is intended to offer Tidal quality at a lower price. The three-way, five-driver, ported, floorstanding Tonda D is Vimberg's flagship. With a gracefully angled HDF-laminate chassis and a substantial aluminum faceplate, the Tonda D is quite handsome looking. Parts-quality is first rate (all Accuton Cell drivers, including a pure diamond tweeter, as well as Mundorf and Dueland caps). The sound quality is outstanding, with excellent imaging, resolution, transient behavior, dynamic contrasts, and undiminished energy. For listeners who crave full-range transparency to sources, the Tonda D is a must-audition. AJ, 320

YG Acoustics Hailey 3.2
$63,400
At roughly the mid-point in the YG lineup, the Hailey 2.3

HARMONIA DISTRIBUTION

WE PLACE PRODUCTS FROM THE WORLD'S LEADING AUDIO BRANDS WITH THE MOST KNOWLEDGEABLE AND WELCOMING RETAILERS IN THE COUNTRY.

WE BACK THIS UP WITH DEDICATED SALES AND SUPPORT TEAMS.

WE PROUDLY REPRESENT:

PrimaLuna®

FELIKS-AUDIO

FYNE AUDIO

booster
The audiophile power supply solution

PATHOS

Cabasse

KISEKI

HARMONIADISTRIBUTION.COM | INFO@HARMONIADISTRIBUTION.COM | 909.931.0219

is a three-way with drivers and sealed aluminum enclosures made entirely in-house. The 10.25" woofer and 7.25" midrange feature cones machined from solid blocks of aluminum for maximum stiffness. Sonically, the Hailey 2.3 can be summed up in two words: precision and performance. In these regards, the Hailey 2.3 is at least the rival of the best electrostatics and ribbons, says KM, producing excellent detail and micro-dynamics at every frequency. Being a sealed design, the Hailey 2.3 is less sensitive to room interaction in the bass than most ported speakers. KM, 309

Tidal Piano G3
$64,000
We suspect that the majority of audiophiles will appreciate the exceptional sound qualities of the décor-friendly, ingeniously designed, three-driver (two 7" mid/woofers and one 1.2" diamond tweeter) Piano G3s. Uniquely, they can be used as 2-way monitors (with one of the woofers disabled) or 2.5-ways (with both woofers active in different bands), depending on room size and musical content. They do have two limitations that are part of their design. They do not provide the deepest bass or play the loudest and most dynamic passages of popular or classical music with the least coloration, but these limitations are relatively minor. In the main, their level of detail and naturalness of timbre clearly distinguish between different instruments, and their imaging is as natural as the recording allows. AHC, 337

Wilson Audio Alexia V
$67,500
Wilson Audio has updated it mid-line Alexia with material and techniques informed by Wilson's flagship production speaker, the mighty Chronsonic XVX. The result is a speaker that embodies many of the qualities of that reference-grade speaker but in a smaller and more affordable package. The Alexia V exhibits all the Wilson hallmarks, including a fabulous low end that's powerful and muscular and extends to the bottom octave, yet maintains a sense of precise pitch articulation and dynamic precision. As with the XVX, the Alexia V exhibits the harmonic richness and warmth in the lower midrange that makes that flagship so involving. Brass and woodwind instruments have a full measure of weight and tonal density in their fundamentals and lower-order harmonics without the artificial emphasis on upper harmonics that can impart a metallic sheen to trumpet, saxophone, and the human voice. Yet despite the tonal smoothness, the Alexia V projects a strong sense of presence and of instruments existing between and around the loudspeakers. RH, 342

Kharma Elegance dB11-S
$68,000
This reference-quality, three-way, four-driver floorstander uses a specially developed beryllium tweeter that is exemplary in its sonic purity and control, and a 7" carbon-composite midrange driver that employs Kharma's sandwich-cone technology, designed to push break-up frequencies as far up as possible, thereby eliminating colorations in the drivers' working ranges. Two 10" aluminum woofers complete the package, housed, together with the other drivers, in a handsome yet inert cabinet. This is an extraordinary speaker with wonderful coherence, terrific low-level detail, gorgeous timbre, smooth yet extended highs, and surprisingly explosive bass. Jim Hannon, 256

Magico S7 M-Cast
$69,200
An extraordinarily revealing speaker that has very neutral timbre and does not exaggerate or fail to reproduce any aspect of sound quality. Its deeply extended but very uncolored bass can seem slightly weak until you realize how far down that bass can go and how clean and tight it is. Dynamics are truly excellent, although the S7 does need real power to show how good it can be. The only drawbacks are that this level of quality is anything but cheap, and the S7 offers accuracy, not romance or euphonic coloration. Here, however, its lack of any trace of hardness in the upper octaves makes its accuracy as musical as the recording, the rest of the system, and listening room allow. A great speaker. AHC, 266

Stenheim Alumine 5SE
$73,500
The three-way, four-driver Stenheim Alumine Five Special Edition (SE) loudspeaker from Switzerland is a unique combination of new and old. At less than a foot wide, just under four feet high, and a mere foot-and-a-quarter deep, its rectangular aluminum cabinet is fashionably compact. Of course, at 220 pounds it's a hefty little box. Indeed, the Five SE's aluminum enclosure, bulk, and squared-off good looks put JV in mind of earlier-gen Magicos. However, the Five SE's twin, slot-like, front-firing ports—one above and one below the pair of 10" woofers on the bottom half of its facade—are anything but Magico-like. Neither are the drivers themselves (the two independently ported woofers, the largish 6.5" midrange, and the 1¼" dome tweeter), all of which use "old-fashioned" pulp or textile diaphragms and textile surrounds. Also very un-Magico-like is the Alumine Five SE's lofty 94dB sensitivity and stable 8-ohm impedance. How does this demure, high-efficiency combination of old tech and new sound? Well, as JV said about the superb Estelon X Diamond Mk II, the Stenheim Five SE is not just a great speaker; it is one of high-end audio's greatest speakers. Its uncanny ability to generate truly deep, powerful, linear bass, unusually rich and lifelike tone color (top to bottom), near-visible three-dimensional images, and astounding detail and dynamics from such a modestly sized enclosure is not just a surprise; it is one for the ages. JV, 328

Wilson Benesch Resolution
$74,000
This unusual design, employing carbon-fiber enclosures and isobaric woofer loading, excels in a few specific areas, but it's the sum of the parts that makes the Resolution such a joy to listen to. This tall, thin speaker is simply nonpareil at unearthing cloaked bass lines—and revealing everything about them. Thanks, no doubt, to the in-house-made, carefully matched drivers and an equally well-thought-out crossover, these speakers possess uncanny coherence. Rounding out the Wilson Benesch's virtues are a deathly quiet noise floor and low overall distortion. These traits, too, add to the speaker's sense of musical suspense, since dynamic bursts seem to come out of nowhere. The Resolution can deliver long-term musical satisfaction. AT, 289

Dominio Digitale

TIMELESS

Innovation through Technologies. Aqua has never followed the whims of market fashion but has always remained focused on achieving true high fidelity sound reproduction.

aqua
acoustic quality

Legacy Audio Valor with Wavelet II
$86,000
Legacy's Valor with the new Wavelet II processor brings high technology and advanced digital engineering to the loudspeaker category. This powered DSP speaker is physically large, with a massive driver array including dual 12" subwoofers, dual 12" passive radiators, dual 14" woofers, a 14" mid/woofer, a 1.5" coaxial midrange/tweeter, and dual 4" tweeters. These are powered by integral 1kW, 750W, and 500W amplifiers. You need to supply one additional amplifier for the upper range. The Wavelet II outboard processing contains the DSP circuitry as well as Bohmer Correction, which provides optimized in-room energy/time alignment and ideal acoustic transfer in both the frequency and time domains. The Valor demonstrates the effect of removing the limitations in dynamic range and low-frequency response of conventional speakers. It realizes a new level of dynamic detail and contrasts, regardless of the music. The sound is highly detailed, with natural rendering of timbre and precise placement of images within the acoustic. AHC, 323

Estelon X Diamond Mk II
$89,000
This three-way, hour-glass-shaped floorstander with a literally rock-solid enclosure from Alfred Vassilkov of Estonia is not just a great direct-radiating loudspeaker; it is one of the greatest direct-radiating loudspeakers. Building on the virtues of the original X Diamond (which already had the best disappearing act and the best low end JV had heard from a direct-radiating multiway loudspeaker, sealed or ported), the X Diamond II adds astonishingly realistic timbral warmth and body to what was already a superbly phase-and-time coherent package. With its new tweeter, crossover, and wiring, the X Diamond II has no audible weaknesses—no matter what kind of listener you are or what kind of music you prefer. TAS' 2022 Overall Product of the Year Award-winner. JV, 323

Vandersteen Audio Model 7 XTRM
$89,300
The top model from venerable Vandersteen Audio is packed with innovative thinking, including a pair of powered 11" woofers, an external high-pass filter that rolls off bass to the speaker (which is then restored in the integral woofer amplifier), an 11-band equalizer that operates below 180Hz to tune out room modes, and Vandersteen's own patented carbon-fiber and balsa-wood drivers. The Seven's sound quality is world class. The extensive bass-adjustment controls allow the Seven to adeptly deliver enormously satisfying bass weight and power without midbass bloat and heaviness. The mid and treble are extremely clean and detailed without a hint of the analytical; this speaker's high resolution is a matter of musical expression, not of hyped transients. Overall, the Vandersteen Model Seven XTRM is enormously communicative and involving. RH, forthcoming

MBL 101 E Mk II
$91,000
Always the thrill rides of the high-end audio amusement park, with sensational dynamic range, superb transients, high resolution of inner detail, and the most surround-like soundstaging this side of a full-bore home-theater system, the four-way, omnidirectional MBL 101 Es had three weaknesses: Their ported bass was a bit overblown; their upper midrange could be a bit bright, and their imaging at centerstage could be a little vague. The Mk II version of this unique omni loudspeaker ameliorates these problems, without losing the unique Radialstrahler virtues. The result is a genuine improvement in a genuine classic. Though not a word we often use in audio criticism (more's the pity), the MBL 101 E Mk IIs are more plain fun to listen to than just about anything else out there, short of their much bigger (and much more expensive) brothers, the MBL X-tremes. JV, 286

Magico M3
$94,000
Disappearing like a planar, this demure dynamic offers a superb blend of drivers, thanks, in part, to an improved carbon-fiber-and-aluminum cabinet derived directly from the Magico M Project and, in equal part, to the company's high-tech diamond-coated beryllium tweeter and graphene-carbon cones. Combining Magico's traditional virtues of transparency and ultra-high resolution with a beguiling touch of timbral warmth, the M3 simply sounds more "real" on more music more of the time than previous Magicos (none of which were slouches in this regard). Cone speakers just don't get much better than this one. JV, 282

Raidho TD3.8
$99,000 in piano black ($111,000 walnut burl)
The three-way (with ribbon tweeter), ported Raidho TD3.8 is a speaker with truly excellent sound, whose conventional appearance and size do not reflect its exceptional performance. Priced at the very top of the high end, it looks a lot like traditional cone floorstanders, give or take a panel tweeter. And yet, as listening to it quickly makes clear, this external visual modesty is deceiving. The TD3.8 has exceptional internal technology and components. Most importantly, it does not sound ordinary in any way when you listen to it. Priced at the luxury level, it delivers luxury-level sound. Moreover, it does not dominate the room visually, disappearing into the music rather than trying to dominate it. AHC, 309

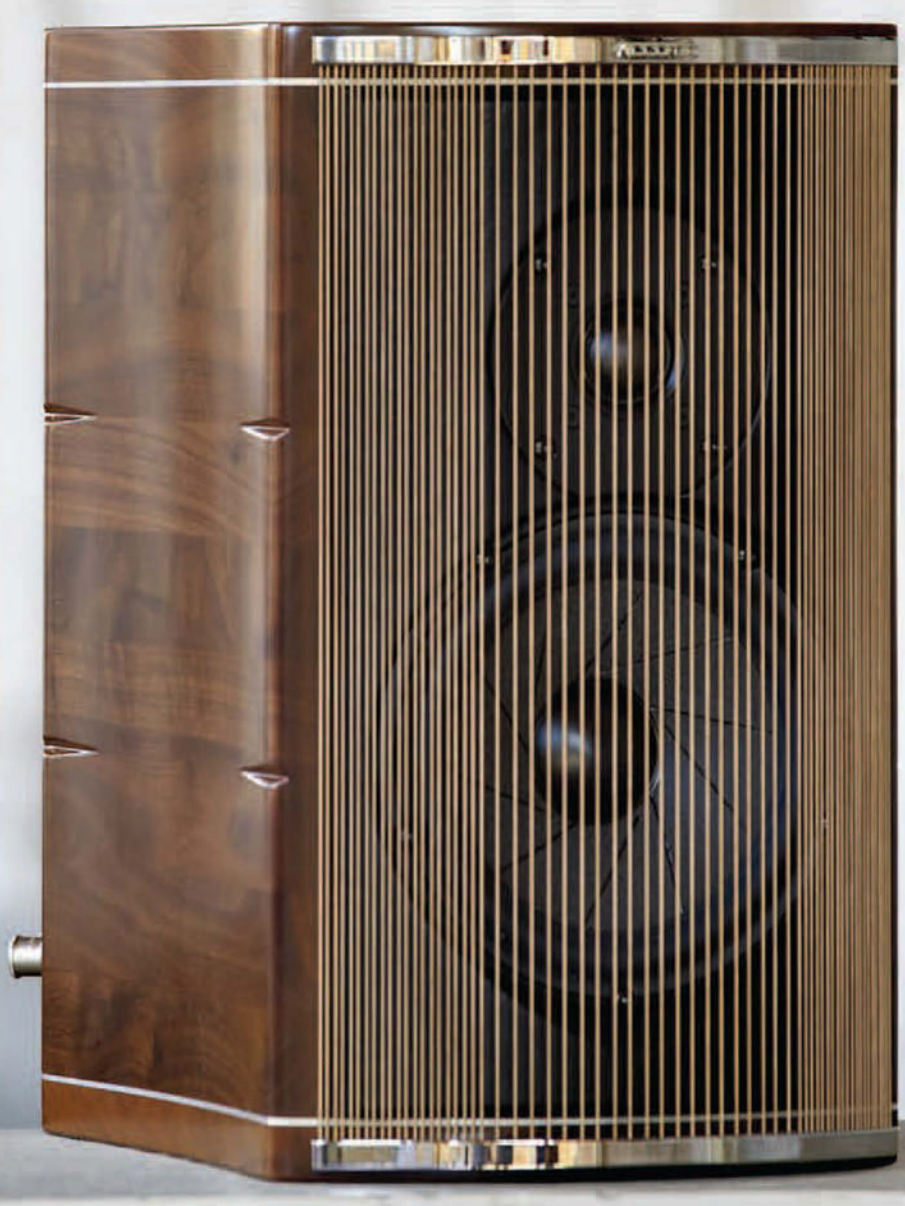
YG Acoustics Sonja 3.2
$99,000
The Sonja 3.2 improves upon the award-winning 2.2*i* with even greater dynamic ease, bass weight, soundstage continuousness, and resolution of fine detail. The main technical improvement comes from a kind of hybrid tweeter (patented) called BilletDome that combines a soft-dome membrane with a very lightweight, strong, and acoustically transparent supporting "air frame." The cabinet and crossover have also been updated for greater accuracy and efficiency in the bass. The 3.2's inter-driver coherency and transparency to sources are exemplary. It recreates a very large, focused soundscape, and its overall presentation allows a great deal of musical expressiveness to come through—to thrilling effect on good recordings. KM, 327

Zellaton Stage
$99,750
The beautiful three-way, floorstanding Zellaton Stage

LOOK MA... NO STANDS!

MEET THE NEW FRANCO SERBLIN ACCORDO GOLDBERG BOOK SHELF SPEAKER

Like a Stradivarius, each Franco Serblin speaker is handcrafted from only the finest hardwoods by a master artisan in Italy. Now with the Accordo Goldberg, you can experience the style and performance of Franco Serblin's visionary design either with stands... *or without.*



FRANCO SERBLIN
francoserblin.it

Visit axissaudio.com or call 866-295-4133 to find an authorized Franco Serblin dealer nearest to you

AXISS AUDIO
axissaudio.com

pushes the state of the art in a couple of important sonic dimensions. Its transparency is breathtaking, and its coherence sets a standard among multi-driver speaker systems. A key to its remarkable coherence is that its three handmade sandwich cone drivers, including the tweeter, utilize the same materials and ultra-thin aluminum diaphragms on a foam substrate. The multiple drivers sound "as one." The leading edges of transients are sudden and crisp with no smearing, and instruments and voices have natural timbre and palpable presence. The Stage has an uncanny ability to put performers in your listening room. JH, 297

MartinLogan Neolith
$120,000
MartinLogan swung for the fences with the Neolith, mounting a roughly 4' x 2' XStat electrostatic panel atop an enclosure that houses a front-firing 12" driver and a 15" rear-firing woofer. Once you've heard the transparency, resolution, and sheer sense of nothing between you and the music that the Neolith's big panel delivers, you'll be spoiled for life. Surprisingly, these virtues of electrostats are combined with seamless integration with the bass, resulting in a speaker with full frequency extension and dynamics along with fabulous transparency. The Neolith is beautifully built and finished, highly flexible in room-matching, and backed by a solid company with more than 40 years of experience building electrostatic loudspeakers. *The Absolute Sound*'s 2015 Overall Product of the Year. RH, 259

Wilson Audio Alexx V
$145,000
The slightly smaller brother to Wilson's mighty Chronosonic XVX, the Alexx V delivers huge on looks and performance, and is a massive improvement over the previous Alexx. This five-driver tower utilizes Wilson's proprietary V Material, along with every new technology Wilson's developed. Although physically massive, its beautiful sweeping lines and open design give it the appearance of being considerably smaller than it is. The Alexx V delves deep into the soul of music. Its finesse, staging, and scale offer not just a sense of realism, but reality itself. The music flows in layers of textural complexity and grace with a sense of ease and effortlessness akin to waves upon an ocean shore; such power yet such serenity. Certainly, one of the most spatially coherent, tonally accurate, emotionally inspiring speakers that reviewer MC has heard. MC, 327

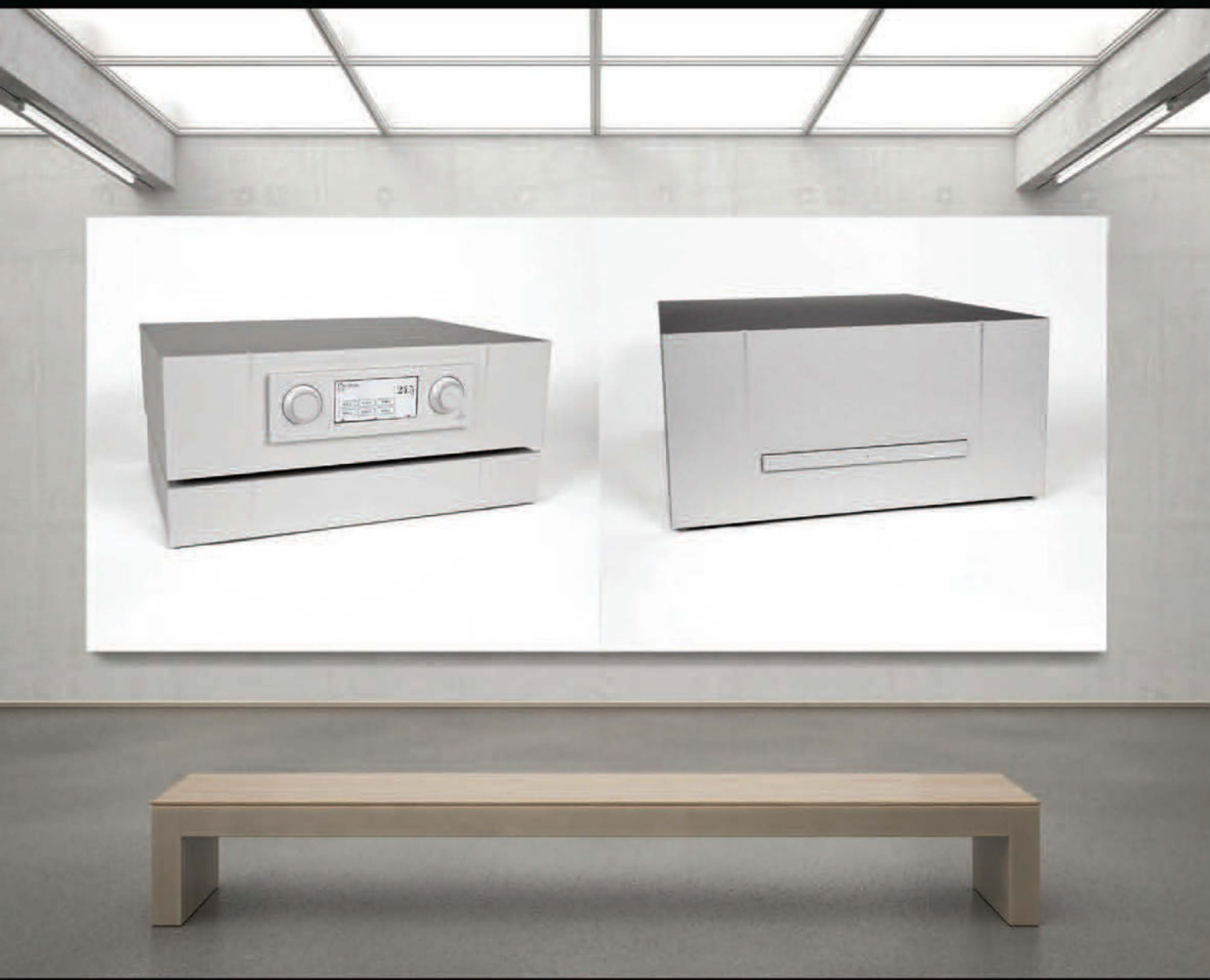
YG Acoustics Sonja 3.3
$146,800
This flagship from YG Acoustics sports driver diaphragms machined in-house from solid aluminum blocks coupled to new motors that reduce audible and measurable distortion. The Sonja 3.3 also comes with new crossover components. A larger version of the Sonja 3.2, the 3.3 adds a passive bass module on which the rest of the speaker is mounted. Sonically, the Sonja 3.3 delivers world-class performance, with a spectacular sense of presence, transparency to sources, and palpability. Its bass is extended, powerful, and articulate. Its overall coherence, as well as its ability to portray a wide range of image sizes, is exceptional. Forthcoming

Rockport Orion
$148,000
With all new drivers developed specifically for the Orion, along with a new enclosure design, the Orion is Rockport's definitive statement at the price and size. The enclosure is made from a cast-aluminum inner shelf and a carbon-fiber outer shell, with a highly damped viscoelastic core material between them. The speaker projects a sense of clarity, resolution, alacrity, and vibrant immediacy. Yet this description of "vibrant immediacy" could apply to other speakers that don't engage the listener musically the way that Orion does. The difference is that although the Orion has a pristine clarity and very high resolution of detail, it doesn't sound forward, aggressive, or analytical. Rather, the Orion sounds utterly liquid and warm in timbre, with no hint of etch or metallic hardness. But what really distinguishes the Orion is the transient fidelity, not just in the way notes start and stop in the usual sense, but that this speed and snap was uniform over the entire bandwidth. A bonus is the Orion's relatively small size, allowing it to fit into many rooms where a larger speaker would be overpowering. A musical and technical triumph. RH, 338

Wilson Benesch Omnium
$149,000
This tall and thin speaker from England's Wilson Benesch takes a different approach to loudspeaker design, deploying many (nine) smaller drivers, four of them woofers in an isobaric configuration. WB has employed highly advanced materials science in its quest to design a speaker that's dynamically coherent from the bottom octave to the top. That goal is achieved; the Omnium has astonishing transient performance without a trace of the bloat, slowness, lag, or other bass artifacts we've become inured to. The midrange, reproduced by a 7" crossoverless driver, produces a sense of presence, resolution, and immediacy that's startling. The overall sound is one of high precision, leaning toward speed and transparency rather than tonal warmth and color. RH, 346

Focal Stella Utopia EM Evo
$149,998
Focal calls its second-from-the-top Stella Utopia EM Evo a technological twin sister to its pinnacle Grande Utopia EM Evo. Indeed, the Stella shares the Grande's high-efficiency field coil or electro-magnetic (EM) woofer concept, TMD (Tuned Mass Damper) driver suspension, NIC (Neutral Inductance Circuit), MRR (Machined Reinforcement Rings), "W"-sandwich composite cone material, Power Flower magnet structure, Focus Time driver alignment, and multi-adjustment sound personalization, integrated into a 3-way design with more svelte dimensions than the larger Grande 4-way. Once properly set-up and adjusted, the Stella Utopia EM Evo offers an uncanny amount of transparency, reminiscent of electrostatic loudspeakers. But unlike many 'stats, the Stella has frequency extremes to balance the sound. The ability to keep up with the lightning-fast rhythm and pacing of music while maintaining bass performance that is tight, controlled, and realistic sounding is a highlight of the speaker's performance. The speaker also boasts near-unlimited dynamic playback capability (with the

Audio that inspires.



revelation series | **Pictor** | preamplifier **Taurus** | power amp

constellation

www.constellationaudio.com

right amplification) and great instrumental separation. With its unusual adjustability and tunable performance, the Stella Utopia EM Evo is a world-class performer. AJ, 337

Magico M6
$185,000
With an aerodynamically shaped carbon-fiber enclosure, the stunningly great M6 represents a design departure for Magico. The rounded enclosure is designed to remove all sharp edges to create an ultra-low-diffraction platform for the drivers. Those drivers are three 10" woofers, a 6" midrange (both of which are graphene-infused Nano-Tech), and a 1.1" diamond-coated beryllium-dome tweeter. The bass performance of the sealed system is spectacular, tonally and dynamically, and the upper bass has warmth, richness, and density of color without sounding thick or bloated. Best of all, the low-diffraction cabinet allows the tweeter to disappear, the treble sounding completely smooth and natural. The soundstaging and ability of the speaker to disappear are sensational. One of the world's great loudspeakers. RH, 302

Rockport Technologies Lyra
$205,000
The Lyra is a three-and-a-half-way, five-driver design with a rear-firing port. Two 6" midrange drivers flank the 1" waveguide-loaded tweeter, with two 10" drivers on the bottom. The enclosure is made from two massive shells of cast aluminum, with the cavity between them filled with a proprietary, high-density urethane core material. Musically, the Lyra delivers a horn-like visceral immediacy with its stunning dynamic performance. Yet for all its verve and panache, this is a speaker of great delicacy, capable of conveying the subtlest nuance of texture and shading. It's also one of the most beautiful in timbre that RH has heard, combining high resolution with lush textural liquidity. A world-class reference in a relatively compact size. RH, 276

Wilson Benesch Eminence
$225,000
This flagship speaker from England's 43-year-old Wilson Benesch is a world-class performer that competes in the upper echelon of today's loudspeakers. The unusual design (isobaric woofers, ultra-tall and narrow carbon fiber and aluminum enclosure, custom drivers) is an example of form following function. The bass is exquisitely detailed and resolved, revealing nuances of texture and dynamics in a way that is simply sensational. Dynamics are whip-fast without etch, and the soundstage is simply without peer. The top-to-bottom balance is spot-on. The Eminence is capable of completely disappearing in a way that unfailingly communicates the deepest musical expression. The bottom end favors speed and articulation over the last measure of weight and authority. RH, 294

Zellaton Reference MkII
$225,000
The Reference MkII is a three-way floorstanding loudspeaker with a single 2" true cone tweeter, a single 7" mid/woofer covering the range from 200Hz to 6.5kHz, and three 9" woofers, all housed in a gorgeously finished, multi-layered, matrix-braced, open-backed enclosure. Every one of the Reference's drivers uses Zellaton's unique sandwich cone, rather than a mix of cones and domes made of a variety of materials—which is one reason why the speaker sounds so remarkably 'stat-like and of a piece. Of course, the main reason the Zellaton Reference MkIIs are reminiscent of electrostats is the forehead-slapping realism with which they reproduce voices and many instruments. With great recordings of acoustic music, the result is a truly remarkable sense of being in the presence of actual vocalists and instrumentalists. JV, 278

Göbel Divin Noblesse
$250,000 (Sovereign subwoofer $29,500)
The mid-line Divin Noblesse from Germany's Göbel High End presents a massive physical presence with its sheer size and faceted hourglass shape. The three-way design is built around a pair of in-house-designed 12" woofers and 8" midranges flanking a very large Air-Motion Transformer tweeter in the narrow middle section. The multifaceted enclosure is ported to the front by four ports per woofer, symmetrically positioned around each driver. This is a truly full-range speaker with wide bandwidth and seemingly unlimited dynamic range. The Divin Noblesse's most salient characteristic is a lively upper midrange-to-lower treble region that brings detail to the fore. The bass had a nice bit of extra bloom and color, but the speaker could get away with this simply because the bottom end sounds so precise and detailed. 335, RH

Wilson Audio Chronosonic XVX
$349,000
In RH's view, the XVX sets a new standard of realism in reproduced music. The massive four-way, seven-driver speaker, housed in five separate enclosures, features more innovations than any other product in Wilson Audio's 49-year history. These include new drivers, cabinet materials, crossover components, even binding posts. The XVX shares with Wilson's $875,000 WAMM Master Chronosonic the ability to time-align the driver outputs at the listening positions with astonishing accuracy—within just two microseconds. This compares with the 12-microsecond precision of previous Wilson products. The result is a speaker with startlingly realistic reproduction of timbre and presence, a voluptuous yet highly resolved midrange, a silky-smooth treble, uncanny transient fidelity, and phenomenal visceral bass impact. A world-class reference that advances the state of the art in loudspeaker design. RH's reference. RH, 308

Burmester BC350
$375,000
The slim front profile along with the beautiful visual design give the massive, top-of-the-line Burmester BC350 an elegance that eludes most big speakers. Moreover, the BC350 is available in a wide variety of finishes, including matte or gloss colors or a variety of natural woods. The driver complement includes a forward-firing pair of midrange drivers flanking an AMT tweeter, dual side-firing woofers, and an upward-firing tweeter. In "Pure" mode, one of the midrange drivers and the upward-firing tweeter are disabled. The speaker is built on an aluminum frame and can be rotated on its base to more easily achieve optimal toe-in. The BC350 has an utterly natural presentation, with a very smooth and extended treble with no trace of brightness or excessive

BendingWaveUSA

Official U.S. distributor for Göbel High End Speakers and Cables
Dealer Inquiries are invited.

Bending Wave USA proudly present the following quality products for sale:

- Göbel High End
- Wadax
- CH Precision
- Stenheim
- Riviera Labs
- Bowers & Wilkins
- B&W
- Martin Logan
- Focal
- Classe Audio
- Esoteric Audio
- Hi Fi Rose
- Parasound
- Nordost
- Wisdom
- Sony
- Anthem
- Trinov
- Storm
- Clarus
- KEF
- JL Audio
- REL
- Paradigm

10404 West State Road 84, Suite 101, Davie, FL 33324 • 954. 579. 7463
bendingwaveusa.com • @bendingwave • @bending_wave_usa

MOMENTUM MxV INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

THE ULTIMATE INTEGRATED

THE MOMENTUM MxV INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER by Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems achieves a level of performance and refinement that was never before possible in an integrated component. Combining the front-end technology of the Momentum HD Preamplifier and the power section of the Momentum MxV Amplifier, it delivers Momentum Series performance in a compact framework whose elegant design only hints at the advanced circuitry within.

Incorporating recent advancements in the Momentum Series, the Momentum MxV Integrated Amplifier expresses the fullest potential of a single-chassis solution. The line-stage section can be augmented by a field-upgradable digital streaming module, as well as a phonostage with variable loading for MC cartridges. The result is a seamless circuit from input to output, possessing the authoritative power capable of commanding any loudspeaker.

Created for listeners who demand the uncompromising D'Agostino signature in a single component—one that is elegantly conceived and impeccably crafted—the Momentum MxV Integrated Amplifier promises an unequalled audio experience.

Dan D'Agostino
MASTER AUDIO SYSTEMS

dandagostino.com

© 2023 DAN D'AGOSTINO MASTER AUDIO SYSTEMS, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

sibilance. As you'd expect from a massive flagship, the BC350 can deliver the kind of deep bass extension, dynamic contrast, and impact that are the exclusive domain of big speakers. Soundstaging is another of the BC350's strong suits, with tremendous depth and palpable air. 341, RH

MBL 101 X-Treme Mk II
$398,000
How do you improve on a truly great loudspeaker, especially a *sui generis* one like the six-foot-tall, four-tower MBL 101 X-Treme *Radialstrahler* system? Well, you have to add something you didn't realize was missing in the first place. In this case, *very* low bass. In JV's relatively small digs, the 101 X-Treme MKIIs' new subwoofer stacks now (measurably and audibly) reproduce 16Hz notes at the same sound pressure level as 1kHz ones—resulting in a low-end extension, clarity, dimensionality, and dynamic impact that JV has never before experienced at home, at a show, or in anyone else's listening room. As he said, ecstatically, when he first heard Jürgen Reis new subs, "This is unbelievable!" How has Jürgen managed this feat? Through multiple changes to the crossover, drivers, electronics, and enclosures of the sub stacks (none of the parts are the same as those in the MKI subs), and the addition of the ingeniously designed, adjustable analog equalization. You not only get unparalleled bottom-octave extension, resolution, presence, and power; you also get a superior, near-seamless blend of cone subwoofers and *Radialstrahlers* in the mid-to-upper bass, making for what is, far and away, the best low-end reproduction JV has heard from a loudspeaker of any kind. When you add this incredible bass to the already nonpareil upper bass, midrange, and treble of MBL's unenclosed *Radialstrahler* drivers, you end up with a sound that will raise goosebumps on just about every well-recorded track. JV, 342

Avantgarde Trio G3
$436,000 (with three pairs of SpaceHorns; iTron amp $49,000; amplifier switching $3900; passive crossover $5000)
This mighty loudspeaker quartet, which is composed of two front loudspeakers and two towers of horn-loaded subwoofers, stands at the apex of sound reproduction, coming close, in many ways, to what the late Harry Pearson was wont to call "the absolute." If size matters, and it indisputably does, then this spiffy horn loudspeaker is best placed in a large room where it can truly strut its stuff. And what stuff! Superlative dynamics, gossamer-like highs, octave-to-octave linearity, and a capacious soundstage—all combine to produce a superbly absorbing sonic experience whose charms never fade. JH, 346

Magico M9
$750,000
Magico's new flagship M9 is a four-way, six-driver dynamic speaker in a sealed enclosure measuring 80" tall. The M9 is built using a new cabinet construction, and it must be actively bi-amped (crossover included). Music reproduced through the M9 had the remarkable quality of appearing from nowhere, completely untethered to the speakers. This characteristic was certainly related to the M9's completely silent background as well as its stunning spatial presentation, with wide staging and continuousness of imaging. The M9 is utterly colorless; the speaker appears to have virtually no sound of its own. The M9's bass extension, power, and weight are, as might be expected from the design, exemplary. It can scale the heights of the most demanding music without a hint of congestion or confusion. Despite this ability, the M9 can convey with equal authenticity the intimacy of a solo instrument. A stunning achievement in loudspeaker design. RH, 332

Wilson Audio WAMM Master Chronosonic
$875,000 (includes Master Subsonic subwoofers and ActivX0 electronic crossover)
With the WAMM Master Chronosonic, an entirely re-conceived version of the legendary original, David Wilson has broken new sonic ground. A vanishingly low noise floor supplies the foundation for the WAMM's sonic prowess. Its scale and dynamic power must be heard to be believed, and even then, it requires something of a mental adjustment to comprehend just how expansive a soundstage it reproduces. Despite its large size, however, the most beguiling aspect of the WAMM may not be its capacious soundstage, deep bass, or seemingly limitless dynamics. Rather, it is the ability the loudspeaker has to draw you into the music, banishing any sense of electronic haze or glaze. It is literally and figuratively a towering achievement. JHb, 276

SUBWOOFERS

JL Audio Dominion d108/ d110
$899-$999/$1099-$1199 depending on finish
The E Series subs used to be the least expensive offering from JL Audio. Both Robert Harley and Jonathan Valin reviewed them and were impressed with their high level of performance and moderate price. Though less costly, the Dominion Series shares much of the design technology and all the philosophy of JL's more upscale models. What differentiates the Dominions from the slightly more expensive E's? First the E Series subs have more sophisticated electronics. Second, the Dominion drivers don't use the dual-spider technique of the E subs, and their baskets are not as deep. These differences aside, the sound is very much the same, which is to say outstanding. SS/RH, 313

GoldenEar ForceField 30
$900
The ForceField 30 brings the build and sonic qualities of GoldenEar's own elite SuperSub Series into the sub-$1k market. Driven by 1000W digital amp, the forward-firing, 8" long-throw driver is enhanced by a downward-firing passive radiator. Response drops into the upper 20-cycle range with conviction with little in the way of overhang artifacts or "slowness." Dynamic impacts exit as cleanly as they enter—a tribute to the effective controlled tuning of the passive radiator. Beyond the visceral impression of deep bass response, the FF30 also helped to complete the ambient sonic landscape. A serious musical achievement, not to mention a flat-out blast. NG, 335

REL T/7x
$1099
A special round of applause is due this mini-sub for music lovers. The T/7x is even faster and tighter than its forbear, yet remains tonally supple, with well-defined timbres. It's also remarkably potent for a single, forward-firing 8" driver augmented by a

quick-reacting, downward-firing 10" passive radiator (and a smooth 200W Class AB amp). The sumptuous high-gloss lacquered enclosure with aluminum accents has inputs for high-level Neutrik Speakon (cable included), plus low-level RCA and LFE. A little classic. NG, 265

GoldenEar SuperSub X
$1750
Almost impossibly small but packing dual active drivers and twin passive radiators plus 1500W of Class D DSP-controlled power, the little X captures the realism of the concert hall, imparting a well-anchored foundation that extends into the low-30Hz range (even touching the upper 20s). Bass is full-bodied and controlled and exhibits the requisite bloom and resonant sustain expected of a subwoofer in the bottom octaves. It will mate superbly with a wide range of compacts and smaller floorstanders and fit into almost any room. Home cinema anyone? You betcha. A subwoofer of estimable shock and slam and musical subtlety that's also a bargain, to boot. NG, 286

JL Audio e110/e112
$1900–$2100/$2500–$2700 depending on finish
Before he got the hefty, little e110 with 10" driver (the e112 comes with a 12" woof), JV was anything but a fan of subwoofers, which always seemed to take more away in midrange transparency, tone color, and resolution than they paid back in bass-range extension, detail, and power. Crossed over at the right frequency—which is easy to do with the instructions that JL Audio provides and the unit's manifold built-in controls—the e110 is the very first sub he's heard that doesn't screw up the sound of the main speaker. Rather it seems to extend that sound into the bottom octaves, producing the highest low-level resolution of bass timbres and textures from any transducer of his experience. JV, 244; RH, 252

GoldenEar SuperSub XXL
$2750
Sandy Gross, the founder of GoldenEar, has crammed an astounding amount of technology into this fairly diminutive subwoofer, including a 1600W switching amplifier that is controlled by a 56-bit DSP device operating at 192kHz. Add two 12" long-throw active drivers and two infrasonic drivers and you have a recipe for a powerful, bone-crushing sub. No matter the source material—rock, pop, or classical—the XXL will deliver a deep and tuneful foundation that helps create an airier and wider soundstage. There are faster and more powerful subwoofers out there (at three to four times the cost) but the XXL will never produce less than satisfying performance in almost any audio system. JHb, 264

REL Acoustics S/812
$3399
The heir to the extraordinary S/5, REL's latest is not just a step forward, but rather a sonic leap into a different class. The bar has been raised on every feature that made its forbear an affordable reference. Yes, it retains the forward-firing 12" woofer and companion 12" downward-firing passive but adds carbon fiber backing for strength and accuracy. There are new sets of custom filters, while the power of its NextGen5 Class D amplifier has been bumped up to 800 watts. Thus, it plays deeper and faster with greater transparency, and reproduces spatiality and the dimensional outlines of a soundstage with a precision normally reserved for the headiest of flagship efforts. NG, 308

JL Audio CR-1 Crossover
$3500
Designed to augment (rather than replace) the manifold controls already built into JL's subwoofers, this all-analog crossover allows you to fine-tune the transition between your subs and your mains with a precision, subtlety, and effectiveness that JV has never before experienced. The result is a truly seamless blend that, as far as JV can see, can be achieved in no other way. A little masterpiece of truly useful audio engineering—and a must-try if you already own one of JL Audio's larger subwoofers, such as the Fathom or the fabulous Gotham, but will work with any subwoofer. JV, 254; RH, 283

JL Audio Fathom f110/f112/f113v2
$4000$5000/$6000
We've long been fans of JL Audio's spectacular Fathom f112 and f113 subwoofers. These two subs—identical except for woofer size (12" vs. 13.5") and amplifier power (1800W vs. 3000W)—raise the bar in subwoofer performance with their unlikely combination of brute-force power and tonal and dynamic finesse. The Fathom family was recently joined by the smaller and lower-priced f110. Capable of delivering high SPLs at very low frequencies without strain, the Fathoms are adept at resolving the pitches, dynamics, and timbre of an acoustic bass. Reference-quality performance at a reasonable price, and dreadnought build quality to boot. The new Mk.II versions offer even higher performance with greater amplifier power, revised drivers, and a much more effective room correction system, now performed in the digital domain (DARO). The f110, a smaller, less expensive sub brings JL's technology and performance to a lower price and smaller size. The model number designates the woofer size (10" in the f110), with the smaller woofer supplied with less amplifier power (1100W). As with the larger subs, JL's Digital Automatic Room Correction (DARO) system, a room-correction technology with an 18-band digital equalizer, surgically removes response peaks and dips. Once eq'd, the Fathoms delivers deep solid bass without the thickness, overhang, and bloat that plague many subs; consequently, it's much easier to integrate them with the main speakers. RH, 283; RB, 344

AudioKinesis Swarm
$4900 (four subwoofers, one amplifier)
This system is based on the idea that the smoothest, most uniform bass response in a listening room is obtained by using multiple subwoofers in various (usually asymmetric) positions. The Swarm includes at a very reasonable price four subwoofer units and a 1000-watt amplifier. The subs are driven in series/parallel configuration so that the amplifier "sees" the impedance of a single speaker. This idea, says REG, is the answer to bass in rooms. The Swarm, with the subs suitably placed, produces bass down to the bottom and smoothly from there on up to where the main speakers take over, and not just at one position but over the whole room. The uniformity of response gives you a compelling impression of being immersed in the bass soundfield of the original venue in a way no single subwoofer can accomplish. REG, 252

Wilson Audio ActivXO
$4900
The ActivXO subwoofer crossover is an updated version of Wilson's long-standing WATCH Controller. The

Sonja 3.2

The modular Sonja 3 platform sets a new reference point for accuracy and musicality. Cutting-edge computational models and thousands of hours of listening have driven unprecented advances in every area: from our exceptional Lattice tweeter to the revolutionary performance of the version 3 crossovers. The end result? Loudspeakers which delight the senses and the soul.

YG ACOUSTICS

yg-acoustics.com

all-analog ActivXO is a dual-channel unit, meaning that it can control two subwoofers with independent fine-tuning of each. These adjustments include the crossover frequency and slope, as well as continually variable phase for each sub. Balanced and unbalanced inputs and outputs are provided. The ActivXO can be operated as a high-pass filter and a low-pass filter in those systems where high-pass filtering the main speakers is desired. Alternately, the unit can low-pass filter the signal driving the subwoofer amplifier while leaving the signal driving the main speakers unfiltered. RH, 308

REL Acoustics 212SX
$5199
The REL 212SX was designed to offer clean prodigious deep bass output at a reasonable price. In a beautifully finished piano-black cabinet, each 212SX houses two front-facing 12" drivers made of continuous cast alloy and capable of 2" linear excursion. The bass drivers are driven by an onboard Class D amplifier rated at 1000 watts. Each cabinet also contains a back-facing 12" passive radiator and a downward-firing 12" passive radiator, both made of the same alloy material. In use, the name of the game for this subwoofer is speed, speed, speed, with negligible distortion. Because of that speed, reviewer Don Saltzman found it was much easier to mate the 212SE with full-range loudspeakers. DS, 286

JL Audio Fathom IWSv2-SYS-213 In-Wall
$6050 single enclosure–$9650 dual enclosure
Forget everything you think you know about in-wall speakers; JL's in-wall subwoofer shatters the negative stereotypes. The subwoofer specialists mount an ultra-thin version of their 13.5" TW5 platform in an innovative suspended enclosure that decouples it from the wall. The system is powered by a 1000W outboard amplifier (2000W in the dual-woofer version) with an extensive array of adjustments including JL's excellent DARO room correction. The sound is classic JL Audio—a combination of an extremely powerful, dynamic, extended, iron-fisted bottom end on one hand, and a remarkable resolution of dynamics, pitch, and texture on the other. RH, 300

Wilson Audio LōKē
$8950
This diminutive sub explores the nether regions to devastating effect. Whether its rap or rock, classical or jazz, the LoKe has a decidedly salubrious effect, both in bass extension and the essential sense of hall space. With a built-in 500-watt subwoofer and a 10" woofer, the LoKe is tight, impactful, and speedy. Wilson, which has always been a champ in reproducing the vital bass region, has scored big time. JHb, 330

Paradigm Ref Sig Series Sub 2
$10,999
The Paradigm Sub 2 may be one of the few subwoofers that can be properly mated with planar loudspeakers. Its lightning speed and ability to project front, rear, and sideways mean that its presence and positioning are simply impossible to detect. The Sub 2 features what Paradigm calls Vibration-Canceling Design Architecture, and the design clearly delivers the goods. The hexagonal cabinet can make it hard to install, but once in place the Sub 2 can deliver a crushing 112dB at 10Hz. JHb, 214

JL Audio Gotham g213 v2
$20,000
This subwoofer really leaves former subwoofer-hater JV at a loss for words. It is so good at what it does—which is deliver power, clarity, color, texture, and sheer oomph in the bottom octaves—that he's never heard anything that can beat it in the bass, either in a subwoofer or a full-range floorstander. Using its own controls and/or the CR-1 outboard crossover, the Gotham can also be made to disappear more seamlessly than any other sub, which is truly amazing considering its sheer size (two 13.5" woofers per side in huge rounded-off boxes) and 350-pound bulk. Thanks in part to its sealed-box loading, the Gotham has zero overhang, thickness, and bloat. Note that JL recommends deploying the Gotham in stereo pairs. JV, 254

Wilson Benesch IGx
$34,000
This cylindrical outboard subwoofer with 18" carbon-fiber driver and cylindrical push-pull motor is said to reach down to 5Hz (-3dB). It certainly sounded fully extended and beautifully detailed when paired with Wilson Benesch's Omnium loudspeaker in RH's listening room—ultra-fast and noise-free, making for a magically invisible blend with the WB mains. RH, 346

Wilson Audio Subsonic
$38,900
Most subwoofers today pack a large driver into a small enclosure, and then massively equalize the drive signal to compensate for the lack of cabinet volume. The Wilson Subsonic is not one of these. Rather, the Subsonic's enclosure is as big as it needs to be for the woofers to operate correctly without resorting to equalization. About as tall and half as wide as a refrigerator, and weighing 610 pounds, the Subsonic requires a serious commitment of space. The three 12" long-excursion woofers in the ported enclosure deliver bass response that is flat to an astonishing 10Hz (–2dB). Make no mistake; the Subsonic will reproduce music's lower octave with majestic power and grace. By reproducing low-frequency spatial cues, the Subsonic greatly expands the soundstage, resulting in a markedly higher level of realism. Requires an outboard crossover, such as Wilson's ActivXO, along with a power amplifier. RH, 308

INTEGRATED SYSTEMS

Bluesound Pulse 2i/Pulse 2i Mini
$699/$549
This tabletop, wireless all-in-one brings the expertise and sensibility of PSB Speakers' founder Paul Barton to the integrated system. The solidly built Pulse 2i accommodates a wide range of inputs, but will most likely be driven by streaming sources via the BluOS app. The sound has a warmth and richness in the bass and midbass that are often missing in the category. The Pulse 2i projects a sound far larger than its size would indicate and has the ability to fill a mid-sized room. The mids and treble are warm and engaging, again defying expectations. Pulse 2i Mini simply a smaller version. Forthcoming

Naim Mu-so 2
$1299
It may be similar in size and shape to a generic tabletop system, but once you hear what this compact system (with three smallish cone drivers per side, 75W on tap

LUMIN

U2

NETWORK MUSIC TRANSPORT

LINEAR POWER SUPPLY | DIRECT-COUPLED USB OUTPUT | ALL-NEW PROCESSOR | OPTICAL FIBRE NETWORK | DSD512 PCM768

L2

MUSIC LIBRARY & NETWORK SWITCH

ZERO CONFIG REQUIRED | TRANSFER OVER USB OR NETWORK | DUAL DRIVE CAPACITY | 4-PORT AUDIOPHILE GRADE SWITCH | 2x SFP FIBRE 2x RJ45 COPPER

EFFORTLESS STREAMING, EXCEPTIONAL SOUND

WWW.LUMINMUSIC.COM

for each driver, and integrated preamp, DAC, streaming, and DSP) can do, there will be no mistaking it for a typical all-in-one unit. It is a different creature entirely. Its best qualities compare favorably to those of systems of separate components up to about twice its price, though it will not play super-loud (an expected result for amps and speaker drivers of this size) and won't give you the kind of wide, deep soundstage that you get from individual speakers. Nonetheless, the Mu-so 2 is supremely musical. MK, 306

KEF LSX II
$1399
The KEF LSX IIs are wireless marvels. There is no tether necessary to connect the primary and secondary speakers, although using the tether bumps resolution from 24-bit/48kHz up to 24-bit/192kHz. The KEFs sport sleek, gorgeous looks, including real cloth wrappings that feel almost luxurious. They're powered by a 70W Class D amp for the mid and bass driver, and a 30W amp for the tweeter. The inputs are simple: Bluetooth, Wi-Fi streaming, one optical connection, and a 3.5mm analog AUX port. Their small size belies their huge sound: Bass is big and tight when adjusted via the Control app, and the midrange is a delight. For anyone looking for an all-in-one solution in a small package without sacrificing sound quality, the KEF LSX IIs are highly recommended. DK, 335

KEF LS50 Wireless II
$2799
Built to celebrate KEF's 50th anniversary, the original LS50 monitor spun pure coincident-driver magic thanks to its blushing pink-gold Uni-Q coaxial midrange/tweeter. Visually arresting and sonically satisfying, the LS50 delivered tonal neutrality at just the right pitch, with superb midrange sonics, full-bodied presence, and potent midbass punch. Comes now an "all-in-one" version of this same speaker, the LS50 Wireless, with built-in amplifier, DAC, streaming preamp (Tidal- and Roon-ready), and DSP room-EQ that gives you the same sonics without any need for outboard electronics. JM, 286

Cabasse Pearl Akoya
$3798 ($800 stands)
A marvel of packaging and sophistication, Cabasse's three-way, tri-axial sphere comes loaded with built-in Class D amplifiers, a DAC, and DSP control with room correction. It's also Wi-fi equipped. All you need to add is a high-resolution streaming service or a thumb drive, and the Akoya becomes a fully self-contained high-performance system—all in an impossibly small enclosure the size of a honeydew. Sonically it conveys an engaging, forward, midrange-centric personality. Imaging is stable and well-focused. Overall response is fairly linear. Ultimately, there's some roll off in the treble range, but nothing to set off alarm bells. Bass extension dips into the 50–60Hz range with surprising impact and amplitude. Cabasse has redefined high-end portability. NG, 322

T+A Caruso
$4450
This tabletop system measures just under a foot in each dimension yet is packed with seven drivers (including a down-firing 6.7" woofer) and three switching power amps. The Roon-ready Caruso supports just about any source (FM, internet radio, optical disc, USB stick) and streaming platform, Though the stereo spread can't compete with an audio system where the two channels are more than a foot apart, the robustly constructed Caruso offers satisfying bass slam and dynamic coherence, even if asked to play loud at a party. AQ, 322

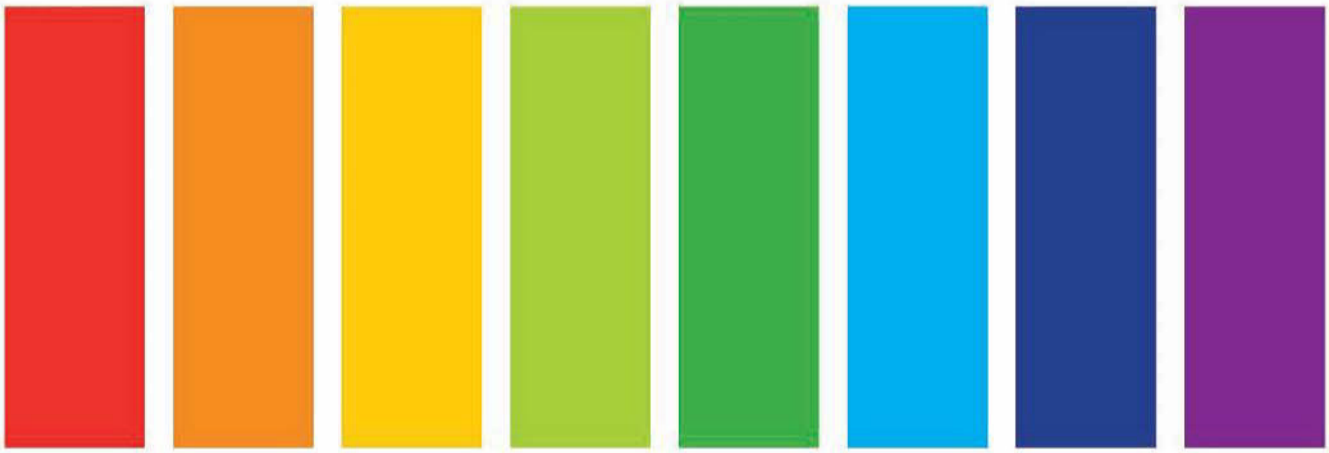
Bowers & Wilkins Formation Duo
$4999 (stands are an additional $999/pr.)
Inside each cabinet, the Formation Duo incorporates wireless-streaming-capable DACs and amplification, all under DSP control. You simply plug in the Duo, and with a few taps on the Formation app, you're streaming music. The Duo's wireless technology is significantly more advanced than that of off-the-shelf solutions. This is no mere "lifestyle" product; the tweeter is a patented driver with a 1" carbon dome, and the 6.5" mid/woofer features the same Continuum cone used in Bowers & Wilkins' top-line 800 series. The Duo's sound quality is a knockout, with spectacular imaging, a very smooth and flat tonal balance, and surprisingly extended bass. Easy to use, highly musical, and technologically advanced, the Duo brings true high-end performance to a product anyone can easily set up and enjoy. RH, 298

DALI Rubicon 6 C
$9998
A 2.5-way floorstander, DALI's Rubicon 6 C is the largest of four powered loudspeakers offered by the Danish manufacturer. The tweeter is a soft dome/ribbon hybrid that's fast and extended, smoothly blending with the drivers below. The two cone-midrange/woofers employ a material for the pole piece called "Soft Magnetic Compound" (SMC) that has standard magnetic properties but virtually no electrical conductivity, which eliminates hysteresis-related distortion. A compact streaming preamp (the "Sound Hub") is part of the package; it wirelessly pairs to the loudspeakers—a reliable and sonically invisible connection. The system doesn't play favorites with musical genres. Power pop, small group jazz, opera, female vocals—everything is reproduced with natural detail and abundant character. AQ, 315

YG Acoustics Vantage Live
$65,000
This ambitious new integrated system combines amplification, DACs, and streaming capabilities with YG's Vantage loudspeakers. Just plug the Vantages and a small control box into wall power, run a pair of thin ST-Type optical cables, connect to a network, and begin streaming from your phone or tablet with the excellent Roon interface (streaming subscription required). The Vantage Live is the result of a partnership between loudspeaker-maker YG Acoustics, electronics and DAC manufacturer Bel Canto, and the British design firm Cambridge Acoustic Sciences. Despite—or because of—the Vantage Live's integrated nature, the system delivers superb sound quality, playing much bigger than its size would suggest in bass extension, dynamic contrasts, and soundstaging. But the YG does something special, producing a feeling of "something" being removed between you and the music. RH, 331

Linn Exact 360 system
$66,000–$126,000
Linn's 360 is an entirely new loudspeaker platform that

“Somewhere over the rainbow...”



The I1 Integrated Amplifier

- User configurable, expandable and uniquely versatile – to meet all system and source requirements.
- Audirvana, Roon Ready and high-res CH Link HD compatible for disc replay
- Sophisticated current-sensing phono option with two inputs and five EQ curves.
- Balanced and single-ended analog inputs.
- 100 W/Ch with user adjustable input gain and global feedback

The single box solution that really does do it all...

plays with AUDIRVĀNA · DSD Direct Stream Digital · MQA · DXD Digital eXtreme Definition · UPnP · roon ready · qobuz · TIDAL

www.ch-precision.com • inquiry@ch-precision.us

can be ordered as a passive four-way floorstander ($66,000) or upgraded all the way to a fully powered system with integral DACs and streaming capabilities ($126,000). Our review sample was the fully loaded 360 Exakt with Linn's Klimax DSM digital hub that acts as a preamplifier and streamer. The 360 also runs Linn's Space Optimisation program that modifies the loudspeaker's response to better integrate the speaker with the listening room and speaker positioning within that room. Space Optimisation doesn't rely on microphones and in-room measurement, but rather creates a computer model of the room and the speaker location. The 360 has a very smooth and engaging tonal balance, with surprising bass extension for its size. It is particularly adept at revealing low-level musical detail without etch, even at lower listening levels. Soundstaging was spectacular, with the pair of 360s completely disappearing into a large and precisely defined stage. Linn's 360 is a very sophisticated piece of technology that's beautifully built and delivers outstanding performance from a relatively compact and easy-to-use system. AHC, 346

POWER AMPLIFIERS

Under $1000

Topping LA90
$899
If you have mid- to high-efficiency loudspeakers that you love, you may find the LA90 to be an ideal power or integrated amplifier for your system. Reviewer SS could easily see a single LA90 as the "summer amp" in a high-efficiency horn system. You can, if you require more power, bridge the LA90 into a mono configuration. Still, SS would not recommend even two LA90 to owners of 2-ohm Apogee Scintillas or Thiel 3.5s. Some loudspeakers simply need more power than even two LA90s can provide. If you are intrigued by the LA90's potential, you're going to have to take a leap of faith and buy before you try, just like SS did. You can always return it, but SS seriously doubts that you will. SS, 335

NuPrime STA-9
$949
Producing 120Wpc and weighing just under 10.5 pounds, the STA-9 uses a Class A input circuit along with a Class D output circuit. NuPrime's website says it "is designed with enhanced even-order harmonic circuitry that mimics the most attractive features of tube-amp sound without incurring tubes' drawbacks and limitations." It's easily bridgeable into 290Wpc monoblocks, and its 47k-ohm input impedance should work with virtually any preamplifier. In monoblock mode, the STA-9 produced powerful bass, even with small KEF speakers. Vade Forrester, 273

Odyssey Audio Khartago
$995
Shockingly similar in tonal balance to certain high-priced solid-state amps, this 130Wpc stereo amp has no discernible grain, high resolution, and a deep, wide soundstage. Positively, the best budget amp JV has heard. JV, 195

$1000–$3000

Audio by Van Alstine Vision SET 120
$1199
AVA's quite reasonably priced solid-state Vision SET 120 is rated at 60Wpc into 8 ohms and "much more" into 4 ohms. Those 60 watts were plenty for driving reviewer DK's Monitor Audio Studios to a more than room-filling blast. The horns at the end of a hard-hitting Spiritualized track came through screaming, purposefully borderline harsh, but the SET 120 never lost control. In combination with Van Alstine's Transcendence 10 RB tube preamp, the amp generated a deceptively cool sound, in the sense of being laid-back and calm, while still providing a taut low end and just enough sparkle in the upper registers. DK, 290

NuForce STA200
$1299
Basic solid-state power amplifiers are not, due to their essential nature (boxes with parts inside), sexy objects that inspire a lot of audiophile lust. The STA200 will never be accused of looking sexy or especially stylish unless you're into stark minimalism. But if sound quality and solid-state reliability are your primary purchasing criteria, the STA200 should be on your radar. You may not be blown away by the STA200's looks, but its sound turns it into one sexy beast. SS, 268

LSA Warp One
$1499
Given its rather modest price, you might be tempted to write off the Warp One as just another me-too mid-fi Class D pow-

Underwood HiFi

VALUE INNOVATION IN HIGH END AUDIO

AN AMPLIFIER FOR A LIFETIME
THE EMERALD PHYSICS 600.2SE

INTRODUCTORY PRICED AT $1999

DELIVERED ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD
600 WATTS/CHANNEL POWERHOUSE
SELECTABLE TUBE OR SOLID STATE FRONT END

Part Time Audiophile summed with:
"At the price point of the Emerald Physics amp, I can't really uncover any shortcomings worth mentioning. It's really just a great amplifier, and I can't say enough positive things about it. Because of its tremendous value and overall superb performance, I'm unabashedly nominating the Emerald Physics 600.2SE amplifier for a Reviewer's Choice Award. Another win to Underwood Hi-Fi!"

Audio Pursuit summed with:
"The EP600.2SE is a perfect example of the value that Class D amplification brings to the audio market. For $1999 with a three-year warranty, it delivers ridiculous levels of horsepower that easily drives traditionally difficult 4 Ohm speaker loads such as Magnepan without stress. Most importantly, across the entire frequency spectrum, the vacuum tubes add a wonderful level of lushness and vibrancy to the music. For those of you who crave power on a smaller budget, get your ears on the EP600.2SE. I'm looking at what excess gear to sell, as this Emerald Physics EP600.2SE has found a home!"

TONEAUDIO SUMMED UP WITH:

"It's really just a great amplifier, and I can't say enough positive things about it. Because of its tremendous value and overall superb performance, I'm unabashedly nominating the Emerald Physics 600.2SE amplifier for a Reviewer's Choice Award. Another win to Underwood Hi-Fi!"

JEFF DORGAY – EDITOR/PUBLISHER
TONEAUDIO – AUDIOPHILE APARTMENT

underwoodhifi.com | underwoodwally@aol.com | 770.667.5633

CALL OR EMAIL TO ORDER

er amplifier. That would be a mistake. SS has, over the years, listened to plenty of Class D power amplifiers; so far, the Warp One is the best-sounding one he's reviewed. If you have loudspeakers that are at least reasonably efficient (or better), and you have no need to warm up their sonic personality, the Warp One could be an excellent and exceedingly rational choice as your next reference amplifier. SS, 331

PS Audio S300
$1649

If you can't get excited over an amp like the S300, you might reconsider your own high-end bona-fides. Based on a Class D ICE module, this dual-mono amp is rated at 140Wpc into 8 ohms. Its sleek low-profile design is matched by first-rate construction quality, Sonically, the era of apologizing for Class D under-performance is over. Music simply snapped into view, in full harmonic bloom. Most vivid was the impression of broad dynamic contrasts from the micro-level to the macro. The S300 was both fast and explosive off the mark, while timbral information was in full-color display. The S300 wears its speed and rhythmic integrity like a badge of honor. NG, 333

NuPrime AMG STA
$1750

The NuPrime AMG STA is a sleek, compact Class D power amplifier with a Class A preamp stage and a linear power supply. The box is simple, with only a metal switch on the front, a small white LED indicator, and the NuPrime logo. It outputs a solid 130Wpc into 8 ohms in stereo mode and 300Wpc into 8 ohms in mono mode. The AMG STA sounds easy and relaxed with a decently solid low end and a crisp, pleasant midrange. It has enough power to run difficult-to-drive speakers in either stereo or mono mode, and a warm finesse that pairs well with most setups, especially with the NuPrime AMG PRA preamp. DK, 319

Coincident Speaker Technology Dynamo 34SE MKIII
$1799

The swanky Dynamo isn't your typical 8Wpc single-ended triode (SET) design. There is no 300B in sight. A 6SL7 dual-triode drives a triode-connected EL34 output stage. There is no global feedback, and the power supply is tube rectified. Expect a sweet midrange, an exceptionally dimensional soundstage, and a dynamic presentation belying the amp's miniscule power rating. Harmonic textures aren't overly liquid, implying decent-bandwidth transformers. Treble textures can be improved via judicious tube-rolling. Here is an amp that shouldn't be defined on cost. It captures much of the magic of SETs at an entry-level price. DO, 283

NAD C298
$2399

This feature-laden amp is built around a new Class D output-stage module, the Eigentakt, that brings unprecedented performance to switching designs. Rated at 185Wpc into 8 ohms, the C298 has generous dynamic headroom, and can easily be configured to operate as a 1000W monoblock. The bass is nothing short of spectacular—powerful, dynamic, tuneful, and tight. This bass prowess translates into a visceral feeling of rhythmic drive and flow. The mids and treble are clean and open, if a

We are the world's foremost experts on system matching

ABYSS
ACOUSTECH ELECTRONICS
ACOUSTIC REVIVE
ACOUSTIC SIGNATURE
ACOUSTIC SYSTEM
ACOUSTIC ZEN
ACOUSTICAL SYSTEMS
ACROLINK
AESTHETIX
AIR TIGHT
ALLNIC/ZL TECHNOLOGIES
ALPHA CORE GOERTZ
ALPHA DESIGN LABS
ANALOGMAGIK
ANALOGUE PRODUCTION
ANALYSIS PLUS
AUDIENCE
AUDIO DESK SYSTEME
AUDIO MAGIC
AUDIO REPLAS
AUDIOQUEST
AUDIOSHIELD
BACKERT LABS
BDR SOUND ENHANCEMENT
BELLA SOUND
BLACK CAT CABLE
BLUE HORIZON
BOB'S DEVICES
BUTCHER BLOCK ACOUSTICS
BYBEE
CABLE TOWER
CARDAS AUDIO
CHANG LIGHTSPEED
CHORD COMPANY
CHORD ELECTRONICS
CLEARAUDIO
CONTACT ENHANCER
CRYSTAL CABLE
DAN CLARK AUDIO
DH LABS SILVER SONIC
DS AUDIO
DYNAMIQUE AUDIO
DYNAVECTOR
ELEVEN XI AUDIO
ELROD POWER SYSTEMS
ENGLISH ELECTRIC
ENTREQ
ESP ESSENTIAL SOUND
EXTREME PHONO
FEICKERT
FERRUM
FINITE ELEMENTE
FOCAL
FOSGATE
FURUTECH
GINGKO AUDIO
GOLD NOTE
GOLDEN SOUND
GRADO LABS
GRAHAM ENGINEERING
GUTWIRE
HANA CARTRIDGES
HARBETH
HARMONIC TECHNOLOGY
HART AUDIO
HELIUS DESIGNS
HERBIE'S AUDIO LAB
HRS HARMONIC RESOLUTION
IFI AUDIO
IKEDA
ISOACOUSTICS INC
ISOCLEAN POWER
ISOTEK
JORMA DESIGN
JPS LABS
KAB
KIMBER KABLE
KOETSU
KR AUDIO
L'ART DU SON
LAB12
LAMM INDUSTRIES
LEHMANN AUDIO
LESSLOSS AUDIO
LITTLE FWEND
LYRA
MAGNAN AUDIO CABLES
MARIGO LAB
MEZE HEADPHONES
MOBILE FIDELITY MOFI
MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS
NEOTECH
NITTY GRITTY
NORDOST
NUPRIME AUDIO
ONZOW
ORTOFON
OYAIDE
PHASEMATION
PRANAWIRE
PRIMARE
PURE VINYL
PURIST AUDIO DESIGN
QUADRASPIRE
QUANTUM PHYSICS
REGA
REL ACOUSTICS
ROGUE AUDIO
RSX TECHNOLOGIES
SENNHEISER
SHAKTI INNOVATIONS
SHELTER
SHUNYATA RESEARCH
SILTECH CABLES
SNAKE RIVER AUDIO
SOLIDSTEEL
SOUND ANCHORS
SOUNDSMITH
STEALTH AUDIO
STEINMUSIC
STILLPOINTS
STRAIGHT WIRE
SUMIKO
SUTHERLAND ENGINEERING
SYMPOSIUM ACOUSTICS
SYNERGISTIC RESEARCH
T+A ELEKTROAKUSTIK
TARA LABS
TARGET
THORENS
TONTRÄGER
TRI-PLANAR
VAN DEN HUL
VIBRAPOD COMPANY
VICOUSTIC
VOODOO CABLE
WARWICK ACOUSTICS
WATTGATE
WBT
WIREWORLD CABLE
WOLF AUDIO SYSTEMS
WYWIRES
XLO

bit forward in perspective. A lot of amplifier for the money. RH, 313

Odyssey Audio Stratos
$2700/pr.
Even if you A/B'd these superb, high-resolution, 180Wpc monoblocks with super-amps on super-speakers (as JV did), you might still find yourself pondering whether the difference in sound justifies the difference in expenditure. That JV ultimately concluded it did is beside the point. The way he saw it, the fact that the Odyssey Stratos monoblocks could give even a picky listener like him pause made them super-amps in their own right. Yes, you can buy better. The question is: Do you really want to? JV, 248

NuPrime AMG One
$2900/pr.
The AMG One is the Evolution Two's little brother, offering about half the power delivery (170W/8 ohms) in a similar circuit topology, incorporating NuPrime's proprietary "Only Distortion Cancellation" (ODC) feedback circuit. The front end is fully analog. Both the preamp stage and the Class D pulse-modulation circuit use the excellent NJR MUSES8820 op-amp. The AMG One not only measures extremely well, but its ultra-low THD and signal-to-noise figures translate into perceptual excellence. It floats a soundstage with a remarkably low noise floor and sterling transparency. It readily retrieves low-level detail aided by its almost spooky silence between notes. The music ebbs and flows with exemplary textural purity and without any obvious tonal bias. Fine-tuning a Class D design is no easy task, but it would appear that NuPrime is most definitely on the right track. DO, 341

Quad Artera Stereo
$2995
This 140-watt-per-channel amplifier—the latest refinement of Quad's innovative, patented, award-winning "current dumping" technology—is, in PS' opinion, the finest amplifier the company has ever made by a good margin, and unquestionably the most uncompromised implementation of Walker's current-dumping circuit. PS, 268

Rogue Audio Hydra
$2995
Rogue Audio has got something with this hybrid, "tubeD" stereo amp. Not merely a tube circuit placed in front of a Class D output section, it creates a sound completely unlike those first Class D amps that bit your ears. Fast, powerful, and resolving, the Hydra reproduces instrumental tones and timbres with accuracy and texture, has good spectral balance, and creates a consistently broad and vivid soundstage. Though GH found an occasional lack of top-end smoothness in the sound of orchestral strings, he noted owners could tailor its presentation by rolling input tubes. GH, 235

$3000–$6000

Rogue Audio Dragon
$3995
The Dragon is a sophisticated, hybrid tube/Class D design that stands atop the Rogue Audio lineup. Boasting 300Wpc into 8 ohms, the Dragon offers a near-granular level of finesse and clarity. Speed and transient detail are naturalistic and lively; tonal balance is predominately neutral, with glimmers of midrange warmth and a well-defined presence range. Strings are particularly well-rendered and distinct. Bass response and resolution are superb.

Cables Unlock Performance
Our Lending Library will prove that!
Our Audio Experts will guide you towards unlocking your audio system's full potential.
Our unique $3,000,000 Lending Library allows you to borrow fully burned-in cables and other products.
Hear our recommendations for yourself, at home, in your own system.
Finally hear all the music you've been missing!

215-862-4870 TheCableCo.com THE CABLE COMPANY Home of the only Audiophile Lending Library

The Dragon can reproduce an organ pedal point or the left hand of a pianist on the bottom octaves of a concert grand with lifelike authority. Not just another high-powered beast, the Rogue Dragon is a truly splendid piece of electronics. NG, 311

Audio by Van Alstine DVA M225
$3398/pr.
These high-power (225Wpc into 8 ohms), moderately priced monoblocks trace their origin to the 1980s and Frank Van Alstine's reworking of the Dynaco ST-120. That fundamental circuit—realized with many refinements—forms the heart of the M225. Within its power limits, the M225 is one of the best, most neutral, and most revealing power amplifiers around at any price. It may not have the dynamic energy of far more powerful amplifiers in the lowest frequencies at extremely high volumes, but control of bass dynamics and detail are very good. The M225's soundstaging also gets high marks for its natural depth, width, and detailed placement of voices and instruments. AHC, 327

Cambridge Edge W
$4000
Reviewed alongside Cambridge Audio's Edge NQ network player/preamp, the 100Wpc EdgeW power amplifier delivers on this London-based manufacturer's definition of *Great British Sound*. Opposing-symmetry twin transformers (which cancel electromagnetic interference) contribute to a substantial physical presence, but the performance is anything but heavy. Instead, look for sonic clues in a signal path of just 14 components. It's this less-is-more approach (also wonderfully realized in the minimalist aesthetic) that has resulted in a power amplifier with surprising transparency and composure. Neither imposing nor polite, the W is a fitting 50th Anniversary celebration from a company known to provide innovation with value. AM, 301

Audio Mirror SET
$4995
This 45-watt monoblock expands the reach of SET designs to include even moderately sensitive 88-to-90dB loudspeakers. Each amp has a pair of Russian 6C33C-B triodes in parallel, thereby significantly extending power delivery. The bass range is well defined, which serves as a foundation for a slightly warm and powerful presentation with satisfying tonal gravitas and a sense of ease on dynamic peaks that is uncommon for a typical SET. The Audio Mirror makes one helluva musical statement and would have earned an enthusiastic recommendation even with a $10k price tag. DO, 289

NuPrime Evolution STA
$4995
Class D amplifiers keep getting better and better, and the NuPrime STA is a prime example. The power-stage topology is full bridge, providing push-pull differential operation with NuPrime's proprietary MOSFET drive design. Power output is a generous 230Wpc into 8 ohms and 310Wpc into 4 ohms. The front end is fully analog. Both the preamp stage and Class D pulse-modulation circuit use the NJR MUSES8820 op-amp. The STA's sonic personality is much like that of distilled water, lacking intrinsic flavor. It simply reflects the character of upstream components, making it a good match for a tube preamp, if you're after a sweet and warm system personality. Its strong suits are tonal purity, soundstage transparency, an expansive depth perspective, and excellent bass control. It's hard to believe that any amp at this price point, let alone a Class D amplifier, is capable of such exquisite musicality. DO, 330

Amped America AMP2400
$5000
The AMP240 is 400Wpc Class D basic stereo power amplifier Unlike many Class D power amplifiers that use a Texas Instruments, Hypex, or ICE power module, the AMP2400 uses a Pascal ProXS2 amplifier module. Its chassis is made of six separate CNC-machined aluminum sections designed to allow for maximum thermal flow. The AMP2400 also employs a high-quality, low-noise fan to permit cooling in a way that solid heatsinks simply can't. The AMP2400 delivered superb dynamic contrast and image specificity coupled with exemplary low-level detail. If you require a powerful, efficient, and ridiculously neutral power amplifier, the AMP2400 can deliver the goods. SS, 338

Pass Labs XA25
$5150
The XA25 amp is among Pass Labs' most humble efforts to date—at least outwardly. And users will admittedly need to be a little respectful about speaker selection, since this solid-stater is rated at a mere 25Wpc into 8 ohms. But that wattage is delivered courtesy of Pass' single-ended Class A design. So, buckle up and prepare to luxuriate in pure liquid musicality. Pass gear often suggests sweetness and warmth, but the XA25 takes these qualities a luminous step further. Beyond the extraordinary resolution engraved in the XA25's personality is an ability to transform a listening space into a three-dimensional tableau of images and ambience. A magical amp. NG, 286

Atma-Sphere S-30 Mk 3.3
$5250
The Mk 3.3 version of this 30Wpc Circlotron OTL amplifier nudges performance higher in dynamics and soundstage transparency. Although guilty of slight timbre alterations and a somewhat dark tonal balance, these acts of commission, likely due to load interactions, point out the need for a compatible loudspeaker and front-end electronics. The S-30 strikes an intelligent balance between quality and quantity, focusing as it does on delivering a strong first watt. Its asking price is a small price to pay for a generous slice of musical heaven. DO, 261

T+A A 200
$5450
This small but mighty (125/250 watts per channel into 8/4 ohms) power amp is part of T+A's Series 200, a component stack that takes a unique—but undeniably valid—approach to building a reference-level system with a small footprint. Since the fully discrete, thermally protected Class D A200 gets its own chassis, it's not subject to the digital and other noises that pollute modular integrated amps. The sound is straight out of the Swiss school: wide-open, pure, fast, and dynamic, but with an extra dollop of low-end richness. For those seeking reference-class performance in a compact, reasonably priced amp, the A 200 is hard to beat. AT, 335

AGD Tempo
$5500
This unit is so petite and runs so cool you won't believe it can put out 100Wpc into 8 ohms or 200Wpc into 4! But it can. The big story though is the sound, rich, voluptuous, yet with every tiny little detail you could ever hope to hear. It can compete on nearly equal footing with purist sin-

THE EXR AUDIO STAND SYSTEM

A LOW NOISE FLOOR IS FUNDAMENTAL

The new Patented HRS EXR Audio Stand Systems at McIntosh House of Sound in New York City and at the McIntosh Villa of Sound at CES 2024.

www.AVisolation.com | 716.873.1437

HRS®
HARMONIC RESOLUTION SYSTEMS

gle-ended Class A amps. Less flashy-looking than AGD monoblock amps, it is their most affordable (and only) stereo option. Yet, the GaN (Gallium-Nitride gain device) Class D gain stage is the same design found in the pricier ones. And even the power supply is the same, though two channels have to share it. The Tempo boasts a power-module PWM frequency of 800kHz, which is very fast, and it sounds fast. Dexterous, agile, it can dance its way into your heart with slow music, too. MK, 338

Bel Canto e.One REF601M
$5590/pr.
To Steven Stone's ears, Bel Canto's 15.4-pound, 300W (600W into 4 ohms) e.One REF601M Class D monoblock is good enough to qualify as the best all-around power amplifier he's heard to date, regardless of technology or circuit topology. Its combination of extremely low noise that makes it suitable to drive even highly efficient loudspeakers, precision three-dimensional imaging, relaxed and natural harmonic balance, and power capability, makes for a potent package. Couple all its sonic achievements with its relatively modest price and you have a power amplifier that could well be a benchmark reference for many audiophiles for years to come. SS, 269

Audio by Van Alstine DVA M750
$5598/pr.
This massive hybrid monoblock with a 12AT7 input stage and a transistor output section delivers a whopping 850W into 8 ohms. Industry veteran Frank Van Alstine pulled out all the stops for the DVA M750, including a circuit based on the patented Fet Valve amplifier and unusual lateral MOSFET output transistors. The amp offers a remarkably jaunty and silky sound—with lots of headroom—that always errs on the sound of musical bliss. Despite its high power, the DVA M750's presentation is elegant and refined. A bargain in powerhouse amplifiers. JHb, 273

$6000–$10,000

Luxman MQ-88uC
$6295
This 25Wpc push-pull Lux is about triode sweetness. Think of it as a modernized version of the MQ-60 from 1969. Expect naturally sweet, clear, and transparent tonality. Female voice benefits from its textural purity and ability to depict subtle tonal shadings. The harmonic distortion spectrum is benign and devoid of the upper-midrange glare endemic to pentode push-pull amplifiers. Microdynamic expressiveness is also a strong suit and a key factor in nudging listeners over the line from "liking" this amp to "loving it." A nearly perfect introduction to the joys of triode sound and a superb match for the Quad ESL-57. DO, 297

Coincident Speaker Technology Frankenstein M300B Mk. III
$6499
One of the best-sounding 300B SET amps DO has auditioned, Israel Blume's Frankenstein IIs deliver on the promise of SETs: a midrange to die for, wonderful tonal color saturation, and spectacular imaging. In short, a sensational first watt! Its combination of affordability and performance makes for a screaming buy recommendation with the right speakers. DO, 228 (Mk.II version reviewed)

Anthem STR
$6500
Anthem's STR amplifier is a muscular yet stylish component that outputs 400 watts into an 8-ohm load, 600 watts into 4 ohms, and 800 watts into 2 ohms; there aren't many loudspeakers that this dual-mono design won't readily control. The dual-mono, 65-pound STR features a proprietary input circuit that Anthem calls "a complementary active-loaded cascoded feedback arrangement." Right out of the box, the STR impressed with immediacy, detail, and authority of presentation with all kinds of music. Spatiality and low-end weight were excellent, and there certainly was no question of the STR running out of steam with the most dynamic recordings. Solidly built, great sounding, and a high value. AQ, 298

McIntosh MC275
$6500
The sixth version of this classic McIntosh amplifier is by far the best, boasting greater tonal neutrality yet without losing the beautifully solid, rounded, dimensional, and natural musicality of its tube origins. Thanks to improvements in the transformers, distortion and noise are far lower than ever, bandwidth higher, dynamic range wider, transparency greater, and transient response better than ever. At 75Wpc (though 90 is typical), the 275 has virtually all the power PS needs, but for those who want more, it's strappable to 150W. PS, 266

PS Audio Stellar M1200
$6598/pr.
This lithe monoblock amplifier is a happy marriage of old and new technology. It boasts a tubed input stage and a Class D output stage that packs colossal power. With 600 watts into an 8-ohm load and 1200 into 4 ohms, it can drive pretty much any loudspeaker with aplomb. And it does. There are few, if any, amplifiers that will grip the bass drivers as tenaciously as the M1200. Its transient speed can only be described as stunning. The treble region can become a little bright, but the overall performance that the Stellar offers is truly stellar. JHb, 313

Linear Tube Audio ZOTL Ultralinear+
$6800
David Berning's Ultralinear (UL) amplifier breaks new ground in emulating a traditional UL output in a ZOTL setting. It also marks the resumption of his "love affair" with TV sweep tubes. A pair of 17JN6 Compactrons in push-pull connection generates 20Wpc. Sonically, the UL has much in common with the legendary ZH-270. Both share transient speed and control beyond the capabilities of ordinary tube amps. Other common denominators are electrostatic-like midrange clarity, which allows for resolution of densely layered orchestration. The best-sounding low-power push-pull ZOTL amp Berning has designed to date. DO, 305 (New "+" version not yet reviewed)

VTL ST-150
$8500
VTL's ST-150 is a relatively compact yet powerful stereo power amplifier employing 6550 tubes that can drive a wide range of speaker loads. A classic all-valve push/pull power amp, the 150 delivers 150Wpc in tetrode mode and 70Wpc in triode operation. Sonically the amp delivers plenty of wallop, but is also capable of fine dynamic shading, excellent resolution, and great overall coherence, with the attendant bloom, air, and texture tube lovers desire. WG, 251

© 2024 Wireworld, Inc.

Mark Levinson No5302
$9000
The fully discrete, direct-coupled Class AB amplifier (with a circuit derived from the company's much more expensive N°534 amplifier is rated at 135Wpc into 8 ohms (270Wpc into 4 ohms) but sounds like a much more powerful amplifier. The bass, in particular, has greater dynamic authority and extension than that of many amplifiers with higher output power. The amplifier excels at reproducing transient detail. AHC, 322

MBL Cadenza C21
$9600
Sounding more like a fine linear amp than the hybrid-switching amp it is, the 180Wpc C21 offers much of the sweetness, air, and texture (if not the full measure of swat) of MBL's own Reference line 9011 amps. Its top end, the region where Class D once struggled, is smooth and extended. Its lows are elegantly controlled but not over-torqued; instead, there's a bit of velvety bloom. An amp that can proudly stand next to the best in its class. NG, 228

$10,000–$20,000

Cary Audio SA-500.1 ES
$10,990/pr.
This easy-to-like solid state amp combines dynamic stability, excellent frequency extension, and a wide soundstage—in a way that serves all kinds of music well. While it has a drop or two of Cary's classic tube warmth, it is not ladled on excessively. You end up with a 500Wpc amp that fills out the frequency extremes better than most similarly priced tube amps can, while still delivering a touch of tube-like magic. It does not have the soundstage depth and 3-D image density of tubes, but it certainly comes through admirably in most other respects at this price level. KM, 301

Audio Research VT80SE
$11,000
A 75Wpc hybrid power amplifier using KT150 power output tubes, this latest addition to Audio Research's Foundation Series, the lowest-priced products in the Audio Research lineup, shares a common styling theme with the rest of the series. It is the first-ever Audio Research amplifier with automatic bias setting, which lets the user choose 6550, KT88, KT90, or KT120 output tubes in addition to the stock KT150s. Output tubes are individually fused to protect the circuit against catastrophic tube failure. The VT80SE produces open, detailed sound with exquisite harmonic nuance and shading. Dynamics are very agile, realistically tracking changes in the music. VF, 287

Bel Canto Black EX Dual-Mono
$11,500
This powerhouse Class D amplifier (350Wpc into 8 ohms, 700Wpc into 8 ohms) sounds more like a Class A amplifier than Class D. The 25-pound unit has a very neutral sound, with a somewhat laid-back upper-midrange and lower treble that result in low listening fatigue. The bass is very well defined—quick and tight rather than warm and rich. The bottom end is also extremely dynamic, and coupled with the virtually unlimited power, will exploit the bass output and dynamic capabilities of just about any speaker. AHC, 290

Aesthetix Atlas Stereo/Atlas Eclipse Mono
$12,000/$30,000 pr.
The Atlas is a hybrid (tube input, solid-state output) amplifier available in Standard, Signature, and Eclipse versions, and as a stereo amplifier or a monoblock. The circuits are identical in each version but realized with higher-grade parts in the Signature and Eclipse. The stereo amplifiers are rated at 200Wpc and the monoblocks at 300W, figures that double into 4 ohms. All varieties feature an integral adjustable high-pass crossover to roll off low frequencies in the signal driving the main loudspeaker. Whatever version you opt for, expect plenty of clean power coupled with a deep and convincing sense of space, lightning-fast transients, and high resolution without sounding analytical. Ultimately, the Atlas is a sheer joy—both sonically and musically—to listen to. A great value in high-powered amplification. AT, 196, DS 305

Classé Delta Stereo
$12,999
The Montréal company's stereo amplifier is a brute, designed with difficult loads in mind. It's rated at 250W into 8 ohms and 500W into 4 ohms, and it's doubtful that too many loudspeakers will faze it. The first 12.5W are pure Class A, so significant heat is generated. A silent thermostatically activated fan pulls room air into the device through a louvered vent that's expelled to the rear—the top of the amp barely gets warm. There are VU meters in front, two pairs of robust binding posts behind, and Navcom footers underneath. The amplifier provides plenty of muscle when needed but is also capable of subtle dynamic gradations. AQ, 312

Chord Electronics Ultima 5
$14,600
The Ultima 5 from England's Chord Electronics is a reimagining of the SPM line, which previously comprised Chord's most successful and best-selling products. The Ultima series is more of a ground-up redesign, with all-new circuits and cosmetics. This 350Wpc powerhouse is built around a switching power supply, long a specialty of Chord. When paired with the companion Ultima Pre 3 preamp, the Ultima 5 is unflappable at any volume level and with any kind of music no matter how dynamic or complex. This amplifier is very resolving, but not in an analytical way, instead resolving individual musical lines with ease. Large-scale classical music was particularly rewarding though the Ultima 5. Finally, the industrial design and build-quality are first-rate. RB, 339

Bryston 7B³
$14,990/pr.
Bryston's 600W 7B³ monoblock power amplifier is a wonderfully musical product. It offers feature-rich, real-world practicality and the ability to drive a wide range of speakers thanks to its very high power/current delivery. If you favor blockbuster solid-state amplification and would rather not spend more on audio gear, the Bryston 7B³ should be on your short list. KM, 269

Constellation Inspiration Stereo 1.0
$16,000
The 200Wpc Inspiration Stereo 1.0 brings the same circuit design and some parts from Constellation's $250k Hercules monoblocks to a more accessible price point. Constellation has done an amazing job of maintaining many of the qualities that made the Hercules such a standout, including a highly resolved treble that never crosses over into the analytical. Transparency and timbres are also first-rate. The icing on the cake is that the Stereo 1.0 incorporates circuit refinements that improve bass performance beyond that of its predecessors. RH, 249

MEET THE NEXT GENERATION

It's taken 10 years for Soulution to improve on the 725. Now the new Soulution 727 is redefining what's possible for preamp performance.

2023 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

SOULUTION 727 PREAMP

Closer to Reality Than Ever Before

LOWEST NOISE FLOOR
At -160dB, the 727 sets the new world standard for noise floor, -20dB better than the 725

NEAR PERFECT TIMING
Phase shift of less than 0.1 degrees from 20Hz–20Khz gives 727 unparalleled lifelike imaging

NEW POWER SUPPLY
New breakthrough in power supply architecture reduces energy waste AND greatly extends service life

OPTIONAL PHONO MODULE
Now with greater gain, lower noise, and full logic control of cartridge loading

soulution nature of sound

Visit axissaudio.com or call 866-295-4133 to find an authorized Soulution dealer nearest to you

AXISS AUDIO
axissaudio.com

PS Audio BHK Signature 300
$16,498/pr.
This 300W (into 8 ohms) hybrid (tube input stage/MOSFET output stage) monoblock is the distillation of all that celebrated electronics designer Bascom H. King has learned about amplifier circuits. The result is a component so rich, natural, and highly resolving that reviewer Anthony H. Cordesman bought the review samples. A genuine masterpiece from an old master. AHC, 259

VTL S-200 Signature
$18,000
VTL's Luke Manley and his team have made the 200Wpc S-200 relatively idiot-proof for listeners who enjoy the sound of vacuum tubes without the need to geek-out or otherwise futz around with them. The Signature range features fully balanced differential circuitry and zero global negative feedback, which not only ensures stability under a wide variety of load conditions but also brings greater musicality to a variety of source material. Beyond its outstanding sound and flexibility in both triode and tetrode modes, this KT88-based stereo amp presents music as a cohesive and engaging whole. WG, 290/334

Parasound JC 1+
$19,998/pr.
Redesigned by legendary audio engineer John Curl (hence the JC designation), the 83-pound Parasound JC 1+ not only packs a wallop, but also offers a refined and elegant sound, particularly in the treble. A hefty power supply and power transformer ensure superb image stability and rock-solid bass. When it comes to a sense of hall space and dynamics, these monoblocks are difficult to surpass, especially when reproducing blockbuster orchestral works. For power-hungry loudspeakers that feature severe impedance curves, the JC 1+ will provide what amounts to a musical benediction. JHb, 316

$20,000 and above

Audio Research Reference 160S
$24,000
This stereo version of ARC's celebrated Reference 160M mono amp combines two channels of the same 140-watt circuit into one chassis with the same aesthetics as the 160M—including lighted "floating" output meters on the faceplate window—for $10,000 less. The sound is simply gorgeous: detailed, fluid, commanding, alive, and highly musically communicative. Rather than a tube amp trying to sound more like a solid-state design, the 160S delivers more of what many solid-state amps can't quite fully realize: outstanding 3-D soundstaging, image density, and tonal complexity—while still providing excellent frequency extension, dynamic control, and overall resolution. Built like a tank (100 pounds) with a removable tube cover, triode and Ultralinear modes, and auto tube bias and monitoring functions, it comes close to being an ideal tube amp in its price category. KM, 312

D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Progression S350 Stereo and 550 Mono
$27,250/$47,500 pr.
The Progression series of electronics from Dan D'Agostino brings some of the circuits and technology of the vaunted Momentum line to a lower, but still significant, price. The stereo version (monoblocks are available) is a powerhouse, delivering 300Wpc into 8 ohms. As with all D'Agostino designs going back decades, the Progression can double its output power with each halving of impedance. The innovative "Super-Rail" power supply helps the Progression to deliver superior dynamic detail, impact, and lifelike realism. AHC, 300 (new version not yet reviewed)

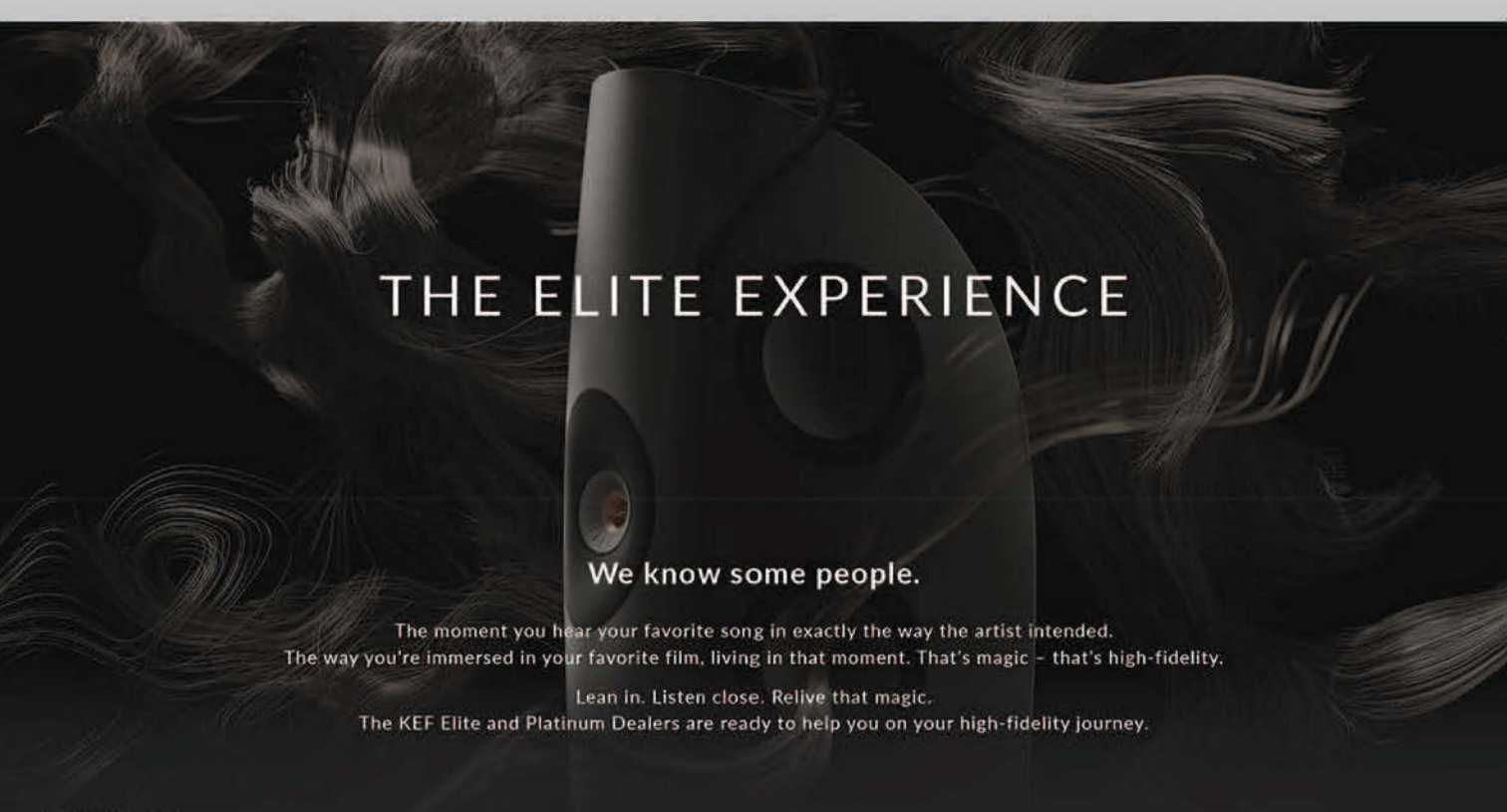
FM Acoustics FM 108-MKII
$27,975/pr.
Though the latest Swiss firms like CH Precision and Soulution may be getting the lion's share of attention, venerable Swiss companies like FM Acoustics are still fully competitive. Consider this extremely compact, powerful (70W/66V/15A into 8 ohms, 130W into 4 ohms), beautifully made, and (given its competition) relatively affordable Class A monoblock amplifier from FM's Manuel Huber. This is a very transparent piece of gear that gives you a keen insight into how recordings are being mastered, how instruments are being played, and how ambient space is augmenting timbre, dynamics, and imaging, and it does all this without adding any sense of the analytic or much color of its own. JV, 286

McIntosh MC451
$28,000/pr.
McIntosh's new MC451 is something new—a stereo tube amplifier and a stereo solid-state amplifier in one chassis. The MC451 is designed for bi-amping—a tube amp for the midrange and highs and a solid-state amplifier for the lows and lower midrange. The idea is to get the best of tube sound while also exploiting the best of solid-state. Most past efforts to get the most out of both tube and transistor technology used a high-level input to drive a tube preamp that then drove a solid-state power amplifier or a separate crossover to drive two separate amplifiers. The MC451 uses a single input and tube gain stage to drive a crossover to a separate 150-watt tube power amp for the midrange and treble and to a 300-watt solid-state amp for the bass and lower midrange, both on the same chassis. AHC has heard enough systems and recordings to know that the midrange and treble nuances provided by the MC451 will improve the musicality of a very substantial number of high-end rigs and suit the personal taste of a wide range of audiophiles. AHC, 341

Pass Labs XA160.8
$28,600/pr.
The 160W, Class A XA160.8 monoblock is yet another inspiring and indisputable success from the mind of Nelson Pass—a man who for the past four-and-a-half decades (his first commercial product was released in 1975) consistently rises to the challenge of besting himself. At the frequency extremes, the XA160.8's transient speed and pitch definition are superb, while its mids are extraordinary, possessing a purity, texture, and bloom that reminded reviewer GW of the best tube designs. Its paramount strengths are engaging resolution and transparency, with no vestige of glare or the faintest hint of edge. A genuine triumph. GW, 259

Tidal Intra
$29,000
The Tidal Intra should eliminate any lingering doubts among audiophiles regarding the sound quality that's possible with Class D amplifier design. It's a dual-stereo amplifier that can be switched to dual-mono operation to power four amps—or even configured as a greater-than-

KEF Listen and believe



KEF Elite Dealers

AVIQ Huntsville, AL 256-712-8912	Wave Media Systems Winter Garden, FL 407-909-3388	The Audio Hunters Simpsonville, MD 301-848-4100	Just Audio Middle River, MD 410-882-4360	Rein's AV Therapy Nashua, NH 603-888-9777	Quest for Sound Bensalem, PA 215-953-9099	Olson's Hi-Fi Lynnwood, WA 206-462-5227
Mythic Home Theater Scottsdale, AZ 602-329-4252	Modus AV Suwanee, GA 404-471-3779	Gramophone Columbia, MD 410-381-2100	Waara Technologies Traverse City, MI 231-935-4511	Electronics Expo Wayne, NJ 973-785-1112	Stereo Stereo Warrendale, PA 724-719-2330	Sound World Appleton, WI 920-733-8539
Dynamic Sound Systems Carlsbad, CA 760-438-3773	Luminaire Smart Homes Boise, ID 208-781-8301	Gramophone Gaithersburg, MD 301-296-6202	Audio Advice Pineville, NC 704-821-4510	Hippo's HiFi Albany, NY 518-482-1864	Origin HiFi Austin, TX 737-787-4434	
Soundings Fine AV Greenwood Village, CO 303-759-5505	Holm Audio Woodridge, IL 630-663-1298	Gramophone Timonium, MD 410-308-1650	Audio Advice Raleigh, NC 919-881-2005	Echo Audio Portland, OR 503-223-2292	IQ Home Entertainment Fairfax, VA 703-218-9855	

Platinum Dealers

C & M Sales Palmdale, CA 661-965-3469	Tech Savvy Bonita Springs, FL 239-920-8324	HiFidelity Audio & Video Voorhees, NJ 856-616-0909	Theater Advice Frisco, TX 972-200-4032
SmarTek Home San Diego, CA 858-874-8700	Hifi Buys Atlanta, GA 770-931-0606	Smart Spaces Oklahoma City, OK 405-752-1115	PunchMax Tech Solutions Ashburn, VA 571-306-1528
Boca Theater & Automation Boca Raton, FL 561-999-9024	Stereoland Bloomington, MN 952-829-9700	Jeetri Electronics & Services Frisco, TX 919-491-4514	

Scan and find a dealer near you!

one kilowatt monster to use with a passive subwoofer—that you can carry under one arm. With its most likely set-up, driving two loudspeakers, the Intra will deliver 340Wpc into an 8-ohm load and 670W into four. Bass extension, tonal richness, and dimensionality are all impressive, but it's the transparency of the Intra that's special. It's as good as that achieved with Tidal's top amplifiers or anything else on the market, for that matter. AQ, 345

Zanden Audio Systems Model 8120F
$30,500 (includes XLR inputs w/input transformers)
For JV, this large, beautifully built-and-finished, KT120-tube-based, 100Wpc stereo amplifier from celebrated Japanese manufacturer Zanden is one of the great surprises of the audio season. Why a surprise? First, though scarcely inexpensive, it is considerably less money than Zanden's typical gourmet-audio offerings. Second, though completely tube-powered and tube-rectified, it has none of the image blur, dynamic laxity, ambient grain, and timbral darkness of typical Class AB KT-120-based push-pull tube amplifiers. On the contrary, it is exceedingly fast on transients, extremely hard-hitting on big dynamic swings, extraordinarily finely detailed, with taut bass, and imaging and staging that are truly wall-to-wall. JV, 243

Constellation Inspiration Mono 1.0
$32,000/pr.
The monoblock amp in the Inspiration series brings plenty of power to the table (400W into 8 ohms, 800W into 4) along with the circuit design of the much more expensive Reference and Performance Series amp. Compared with the half-the-price stereo version, the Mono 1.0 offers even wider dynamics, a more solid bottom-end, and an effortlessness on musical peaks (which are already excellent with the Stereo 1.0). The Mono 1.0 shares Constellation's signature sound of tremendous transparency, a finely detailed treble, gorgeous midrange textures, and a sense of refinement and sophistication. RH, 249

WestminsterLab Rei
$33,900
These diminutive monoblocks from young Hong Kong-based WestminsterLab feature an innovative sliding-bias technique that allows them to deliver 100W of pure Class A power from an amplifier a fraction of the size, weight, and heat-generation of other Class A amps. What's more, the Rei can double its power as the impedance is halved, and four amplifiers can be combined for 400Wpc. The Rei is characterized by a lively, open, and transparent midrange and treble, with an unusually detailed and articulate bass. This amp lets you hear everything the bass player is doing with great alacrity, which conveys the music's rhythmic power. Don't expect typical Class A laid-back mids and treble; the Rei has an incisive overall presentation. We don't know how WestminsterLab packed so much Class A power and sound quality into such a diminutive chassis, but there's no arguing with the results. RH, forthcoming

Audio Research Reference 160M
$34,000/pr.
The product of two years of research and development, the Reference 160Ms—ARC's newest monoblock power amps—don't sound like any other ARC amplifiers JV has heard, and he's heard just about all of them. Gone are the characteristic brightness—the incandescent "top-down" tonal balance—and the soft grainy noise that any ARC fan has grown used to. Gone, as well, are some (not all) of ARC's traditional and seemingly limitless spaciousness and bloom. In their stead are a more neutral (maybe slightly bottom-up) tonal palette, audibly lower noise (resulting in zero grain), more and better-focused detail, richer timbre, fuller power-range response, and a markedly increased sense of control over every aspect of the presentation. JV, 294

Boulder Amplifiers 1160
$34,500
Benefiting from design and build improvements developed for Boulder's two higher tiers (the 2100 and 3000 lines), the all-new 1160 is significantly better than the amplifier it replaced. The output section is identical in parts and design to that of the 2100 series amplifiers but with less power. Nonetheless, the 1160 can effortlessly deliver a massive amount of clean wattage in ways that make the Boulder sound more powerful than similarly rated competition. It handles deep bass transients with aplomb, providing lifelike dynamics and the ability to control loudspeakers. The 1160's "voicing" reveals the music rather than colors it, and this makes this amp a remarkably good core component for building a truly excellent system. AHC, 287

Krell KSA-i400
$36,000
A monster Class A amplifier, packing 400Wpc into 8 ohms and a whopping 800Wpc into 4 ohms, the Krell KSA-i400 offers 164V peak-to-peak output voltage and 58V rms, with 62 amps of peak output current and a damping factor of greater than 800. Add to that 5400VA of transformers and 188,000uF of capacitance, and you can drive pretty much anything effortlessly. The amp maintains Class A by using a new iBias circuit topology that checks current and adjusts bias to maintain a preset low current in a feedback design monitoring speaker impedance. Krell also implements an internet-based control and monitoring system to access power, temperature, balance, etc. from an app. This stereo amp simply sounded right. The speed, agility, low-frequency sock, and dynamic scale screamed Class A on steroids. Yet it maintained the nuance and finesse, the midrange bloom, and high-frequency blossom that Class A delivers without the power limits that we have come to expect. MC, 339

CH Precision A1.5
$39,500 ($75,000/pr. monoblock)
The Swiss company CH Precision has come on strong in recent years. Its latest entrant into the amplifier wars is the solid-state A1.5 amplifier, an upgraded version of its A1 amplifier that can be run in a variety of configurations, included bridged or mono. Indeed, the amplifier can be divvied up to run two main loudspeakers and two subwoofers simultaneously. With a new 1700VA toroidal transformer, the A1.5 boasts plenty of power, enough to drive pretty much any loudspeaker with aplomb. Its excellent tonality, low noise floor, and taut control ensure that it always delivers the musical goods. JHb, 305

Lamm Industries M1.2 Reference
$39,990/pr.
Another winner from the fertile mind of Vladimir Lamm. Combining brawn

POTENCY
BEAUTY
SOUL

hi-fi+
WINNER
2023

JMF Audio

Manufacture de France®, depuis 1985

Experience JMF Audio at:

Fidelis	Scott Walker Audio	Farnsworth Audio
Nashua, NH	Anaheim, CA	Draper, UT
603-703-1800	714-630-4100	801-580-8904

www.jmf-audio.com North American and UK distributor: Audio Skies info@audioskies.com +1-310-975-7099

and finesse, the M1.2 drives even challenging loads with ease. Its siren song of suave harmonic textures, tight bass control, articulate transients, kinetic drive, and essential tonal neutrality is musically most persuasive. DO, 188

Gryphon Antileon EVO
$40,000
The Gryphon's triumph is delivering the great virtues of Class A operation—seductive warmth, liquid textures, and a sense of ease—with tremendous speed and dynamic authority, along with visceral excitement and energy. The sound is warm and utterly liquid—almost voluptuous, without sounding thick, colored, or closed-in. The dual-mono design, with 150Wpc, imbues the Antileon EVO with unflappable authority. Throw in spectacular build-quality and striking industrial design, and you have one of the great modern Class A amplifiers. As with all true Class A amplifiers, the Antileon EVO runs hot. RH, 316

MBL Noble N15
$41,600/pr.
Class D amplifiers have come a long way since JV reviewed several of the first high-end samples way back when. This latest version, from MBL's engineering genius Jürgen Reis, is not only flat-out powerful (560W/36A into 4 ohms); it is also (unlike first-generation D) relatively load-, level-, and frequency-independent. Sweet on top and a shade bottom-up in balance, the N15 is not the last word in resolution or treble extension (even in the MBL line), but then it doesn't cost what that last word costs. What it is is unfailingly enjoyable, powerful, and musical, fully capable of a realism that raises goosebumps and of a soundfield of head-slapping breadth, width, and depth. JV, 287

Absolare Passion 845
$45,500 ($57,750, Signature Version)
These gorgeous, leather-clad single-ended-triode monoblocks deliver the glories of SET circuits in a cost-no-object implementation—gorgeous timbre, a smooth and relaxed treble, tremendous soundstage depth and dimensionality—but do so with enough power to drive real-world loudspeakers to satisfying playback levels. Their 52 watts, coupled with genre-defying bass extension and dynamic impact, offer qualities that fly in the face of conventional wisdom about SETs. But the Absolare's real magic is in the sense of immediacy—that impression of hearing contemporaneous music-making unencumbered by the electro-mechanical contrivance of the playback system. The result is a deep immersion in the musical expression. RH, 234

Lamm Industries ML2.2
$50,890/pr.
This 18W single-ended triode amplifier from Vladimir Lamm defies all the stereotypes about SET amplifiers. The ML2.2 doesn't offer a glorious midrange at the expense of the frequency extremes; it offers a glorious midrange in addition to glorious performance over the entire spectrum, save for the lowest bass. Simply put, the ML2.2 is one of the three most lifelike-sounding amplifiers RH has heard (the others are the Berning 211/845 and Absolare Passion 845). The caveat is that you must mate the ML2.2 with a loudspeaker of high sensitivity and a benign load. RH, 230

Absolare Hybrid Stereo, Signature Edition
$52,000
Absolare has managed to capture much of the magic of its reference-class products in the Hybrid Stereo power amplifier. The Hybrid combines tubes in the front end with a 275Wpc (4 ohms) solid-state output stage. Yet there's no hint of transistors in the Hybrid's sound; it has astonishing liquidity of timbre, is utterly grain-free, and projects that elusive sense of midrange presence that is the hallmark of the best SETs. The Hybrid creates a directness of musical expression—of hearing nothing between you and the music—that is unique among solid-state amplifiers, in RH's experience. RH, 322

CH Precision M1.1
$54,000; $104,000/pr.
Winner of TAS' 2015 Product of the Year award for cost-no-object amplifier, this deluxe, Swiss-made, bridgeable (or adaptable to stereo use), high-current, high-power, 200W, Class AB amplifier—authored by the same engineers, Florian Cossy and Thierry Heeb (the C and H of CH Precision) who designed Goldmund's distinguished electronics back in the day—seems to have some of the sonic DNA of another Swiss company's, Soulution's, world-class electronics. Indeed, JV reports that he would be hard put to choose between the M1 and Soulution's 711 in every regard save for the bass, where the Soulution still holds an edge in weight, power, and color. When it comes to resolution, however, it is a different story. Indeed, with a slightly less dark (i.e., "bottom up") balance, the CH Precision draws ahead in detail. JV, 259

Constellation Centaur II Stereo
$57,000
Very high resolution and voluptuous tone color generally don't go together in hi-fi gear, and when they do—as in Class A triode tube circuits—they do so at a price in neutrality. Not so the Class AB 250Wpc Constellation Performance Series Centaur II stereo amp, which has gorgeous color and texture on top, coupled with an uncanny ability to resolve very fine details without etching or "spotlighting" them. Among the loveliest, highest-resolution solid-state amps JV has yet heard. JV

Constellation Taurus
$58,000/pr.
Part of Constellation's trio of Revelation series solid-state electronics, the Taurus monoblocks make musical magic. Sonic compromises such as accurate-but-analytical, silky-but-smeared, musical-but-veiled simply don't apply. You get it all: lifelike tonal balance, refined resolution, expansive soundstaging, fantastic dynamic range and control—all woven into a compelling musical whole. The Taurus mono amp puts out 500 watts and sounds more powerful than many similarly rated products. Though housed in less elaborate casework than its more expensive brethren, the Taurus delivers much higher-level Constellation magic at a less lofty price. KM, 294

T+A M 40 HV
$62,850/pr.
T+A's monoblock hybrid amplifier boasts the kind of power you need to ride on the sonic equivalent of the Autobahn. (T+A's accompanying P3100HV preamplifier is also extraordinarily incisive.) The M 40 produces an immense soundstage that almost allows you to count the members

of an orchestra row by row. It also seems to be virtually grainless. Raise the volume and there is no sense of strain. These 550W amplifiers, whose input stage is based around a pair of 6SN7 tubes, can be run in either high power or high current mode, with the latter providing a richer sound. This amplifier offers not simply rock-solid, but also invariably seductive performance. JHb, 316

Zanden Audio Systems Model 9600mk2
$70,000/pr.
For those of you who own speakers that don't require the very last word in power and that are well-damped in the bottom end, it is difficult to imagine a more appealing amplifier than this drop-dead-gorgeous-looking Class A/AB tube monoblock from the great Japanese engineer Kazutoshi Yamada of Zanden Audio Systems. Powered by twin 845 triodes, the 60W in Class A (and 100W in Class AB) Model 9600 Mk2 is a veritable model of neutrality, producing a near-divinely natural tonal balance from the top almost to the bottom (where it becomes a little outsized), without any hint of excess darkness or brightness. Gobsmackingly detailed and lifelike, the Model 9600 Mk2 is simply one of the best medium-powered tube amplifiers JV has heard. JV, 293

MBL 9008 A
$70,200/pr.
The massive, high-current, high-bandwidth, high-power (440W into 8 ohms, 840W into 4 ohms, 1000W into 2 ohms), very-low-distortion, Class AB 9008 A monoblock amplifier sits just behind MBL's even more massive and powerful 9011 monoblock in the company's Reference Line. Both amps were designed by Jürgen Reis, which is tantamount to saying that both amps are bulletproof technical and sonic marvels. Built using the finest parts, the 9008 A is a beast with a velvet voice. Seemingly inexhaustible speed, power, and plumb-the-depths resolution are here mated to a dark, rich, beautiful tonal palette. The result is something very like what you hear with Soulution's finest amps—a gorgeous bottom-up presentation with the solidity of an ebony pillar. Perfect for any of MBL's own speakers, including the 101s and the X-tremes, and swell with anything else. One of JV's references. Forthcoming

Soulution 711
$74,975
Like Soulution's 501 monoblocks (but even more so), this massive, seemingly inexhaustible stereo amplifier is capable of virtually unlimited current and amperage regardless of load. Slightly dark and very rich in tone color, blessed with tube-like dimensionality and bloom, sweet and subtle in the treble, standard-settingly powerful and well-defined in the bass, ultra-fast on transients, excellent at resolving inner detail, with a soundstage the size of the Ritz, the 711 hasn't any obvious weaknesses. JV has never heard a solid-state amp that is more thrilling powerful or ravishingly beautiful or consistently realistic than this beastie boy from Zurich. JV, 249

Audio Research REF 750 SE
$75,000/pr.
For many music lovers, these massive amplifiers will be the final word in driving any full-range loudspeaker. You would expect effortless power from an amplifier sporting 16 KT150 output tubes, and

that is exactly what you get. Even with difficult-to-drive loudspeakers, there is an ease of presentation and lack of compression that opens a new level of realism for all music source material. But the most surprising feature of the 750 SEs is their finesse and delicacy on relatively simple musical material (such as piano and cello duos), even at low listening levels—not unlike what you would expect from single-ended amps. Their cost is substantial, but if you value natural and effortless music reproduction, the REF 750 SEs are truly satisfying. DS, 290

Berning 211/845
$80,000/pr.
In the 211/845, David Berning has created the most ambitious realization yet of his brilliant ZOTL circuit that allows a tube amplifier to operate without an audio-output transformer. The 211/845 offers 60W of pure Class A triode tube power (via either 211 or 845 output tubes) with no feedback. The 211/845 conveys the beauty of instrumental timbre and voices with a stunning realism and immediacy. The impression that everything between you and the music has been stripped away is astonishing. In this regard, the 211/845 simply has no peer, tube or solid-state. Surprisingly, the bass is well defined and tuneful, although not the last word in dynamic impact. The highish output impedance and limited current delivery dictate that the 211/845 be matched with a loudspeaker of appropriate sensitivity and impedance. But when given the right load, the Berning 211/845 is nothing short of magical. RH, 265

Pass Labs Xs300
$85,000/pr.
AHC has been using Pass amps as one of his references for years, and he had real doubts whether this newer design could sound all that much better than what he was used to. Well, the devil lies in the details, and the Xs300 monoblocks provide those details in as neutral and accurate a manner as any amplifier he's heard. Outstanding in all the usual areas for a reference-quality amplifier, but its deep bass and transition from the upper bass to the midrange truly enhance the musical experience. So does a level of dynamic life and detail that must be heard rather than described in words. Capable of driving even the most demanding speakers, the Xs300 produces 300 watts into 8 ohms and 600 watts into 4 ohm and has a maximum output current of 60 amps. AHC, 243

Tidal Ferios
$85,000/pr.
This beautifully built middle amplifier in Tidal's three-product range is brimming with clever design touches delivered with elaborate execution. The parts-quality, attention to the smallest detail, and fit 'n' finish are as good as they get. This monoblock delivers 300W into 8 ohms (680W into 4) and sounds like a powerhouse. The bass is robust and well defined, and the midrange has a remarkable sense of transparency and presence. One of the most immediate and least-colored solid-state amplifiers RH has heard. RH, 306

Air Tight 3211
$89,975/pr.
This beautiful and beautifully made all-tube monoblock, powered by a pair of Chinese 211s in a push-pull configuration, generates 30W of Class A power and 120W of Class AB. If you're thinking that these storied, directly heated triodes make for a voluptuously colored sound, you couldn't be more wrong. The 3211 is a neutral, transparent, effortlessly powerful amplifier with simply superb bass (none of the usual "for a tube amp" qualifications needed), superb transient response, and superb resolution. It is not often that JV has come across a piece of electronics that strikes him as an "instant classic"; this genuine masterpiece from Air Tight is an exception: an amplifier that can hold its own among the very best tube designs of the past and of the present day. JV

VTL Siegfried II
$90,000/pr.
The VTL Siegfried is not simply one of the most powerful and musical tube amplifiers in existence; it is also one of the most reliable. It features a wealth of features designed to make it user-friendly and avoid breakdowns. A fault-sensing system shuts down a tube before it can damage the amp. In addition, a precision regulated power supply regulates the output tubes, helping to produce a pure, fast, and very enticing sound. The Siegfried lands on the (slightly) warmer and more burnished side of the sound spectrum, and its immense power reserves endow recordings with real heft and weight. A visceral and emotional experience that is not soon forgotten. JHb, 246

Ypsilon Hyperion
$98,000/pr.
The Ypsilon Hyperion monoblock amplifier is a hybrid that features a tube input stage and a solid-state output stage. The tubes add a dollop of warmth and sinuosity to the affair, while the solid-state output provides grip and transparency. Ypsilon designer Demetris Baklavas has created some musical magic with this latest design, which outputs a healthy 450 watts. The trademark Ypsilon sound—a lack of an electronic signature—is fully apparent in the amazing purity of the notes. The Hyperion does not have quite the slam in the lower bass of its purely solid-state brethren, but it possesses a pitch definition that is pretty much unrivaled. JHb, 283

CH Precision M10
$104,000; $198,000/pr. (Anthracite or Satin Gold finish $2,000/chassis)
These flagship amplifiers from Swiss manufacturer CH Precision are simply unprecedented in set-up flexibility, control, and adaptability to different systems. The 300Wpc M10 stereo power amplifier can be operated as a monoblock, or in a bi-amp setup. The entire system can be set up and controlled via CH's outstanding app. The 10 Series offers extraordinary sonic performance and a level of musical engagement that must be experienced to be believed. Although the sound has a pristine clarity and crystalline transparency, the 10 Series never sounds even remotely analytical. No matter the music, the 10 Series delivers a heightened sense of the musicians' commitment and intent. Listening to music through the 10 Series is a revelatory experience. RH's reference. RH, 323

Constellation Centaur II
$114,000/pr.
These 500W monoblocks feature the same circuit topology as the mighty $190,000-a-pair Constellation Hercules monos but with a less elaborate implementation and half the output stage for "only" 500W of output power. The beautifully built Centaurs have ravishing tone color, are ex-

ZELLATON
THE LEGENDARY SPEAKER
by Podszus
ZELLATON
by Podszus
PLURAL EVO
Audio arts
INFO@AUDIOARTSNYC.COM
AUDIOARTSNYC.COM

ceptionally detailed, and most significantly, are extremely transparent to sources. They are also lightning fast but without a sense of etch. Outstanding dynamics and seemingly unlimited power delivery round out the presentation of this highly appealing amplifier. RH, 233

Boulder Amplifiers 2150
$118,000/pr.
The Boulder 2150 monoblock amplifier is an engineering marvel. It offers a smooth, seductive, and powerful sound that places it in the very highest echelon of solid-state amplification, perhaps superseded only by its big brother in the Boulder 3000 Series. With its 1000 watts of Class A power on call, this amplifier can pretty much deliver limitless oomph, but the most remarkable aspect of the 2150 is its control—the softest passage is delineated with what appears to be the utmost timbral fidelity. Cymbal swishes hover in the air for what seem like an eternity. And the ease with which you can follow a bass line when delivered by the 2150 is a distinct pleasure. The Boulder builds on the many virtues of solid-state to provide amazingly realistic reproduction of recorded sound. AHC, 249

Siltech SAGA Amplification System
$120,000 (preamp and two-chassis amp)
This brilliantly engineered, three-box, Class A preamplifier and 360Wpc (into 8 ohms) Class A stereo power amplifier are not just a hybrid of triode tubes and transistors; they are also a hybrid of battery power and AC power, of conventional circuitry and pure light (the SAGA uses a beam of light to bias its resistors). There has never been anything to JV's knowledge like the Siltech SAGA System. Nor does anything else sound like it. The tube preamp/amp for the solid-state maven, the transistor preamp/amp for the tube aficionado, the SAGA manages to combine most of the signal virtues of each amplification device into a preamp/amp with the color, dimensionality, and bloom of glass audio and the resolution, frequency extension, transient speed, low noise, and high control of solid-state. Something new and genuinely wonderful sounding under the hi-fi sun, and co-winner of TAS' 2013 Technology Breakthrough of the Year Award. JV, 239

Constellation Hercules II
$125,000/$250,000 pr.
This massive dreadnought of a power amplifier (1100W into 8 ohms, 270 pounds each) has all the power, dynamic impact, and effortless ease one would expect from such a behemoth. But the Hercules II is much more than a brute; this amplifier has the greatest delicacy, resolution, and finely filigreed rendering of the upper-midrange and treble that RH has heard. The Hercules II's transparency and resolution of musical detail are simply sensational, and in a class of their own. The polite bottom end of the original Hercules has been replaced by a full-bodied and weighty presentation that provides a more solid tonal and dynamic foundation. One of RH's long-term references. RH, 260

VAC Statement 450 iQ
$126,000/pr.
This immensely powerful, virtually self-biasing, KT-88/6SN7-based, 450W tube monoblock surprised JV with its grip and extension in the bass. Not surprising were its gorgeous density of tone color, three-dimensional imaging, huge soundstage, and superb reproduction of instrumental textures. A bit dark in balance, utterly liquid in its effortless delivery of power—which gives it a dynamic continuousness, to quote HP, like unto the real thing (to quote him again)—the 450 iQ is a latter-day paragon of high-power tube amplification, with all the modern conveniences of electrifying transient response and very fine detail added to the mix. No, it does not have the slam, speed, and resolution of a Soulution or a CH Precision or a Technical Brain, but it's got more meat on dem bones. JV, 263

Lamm Industries ML3 Signature
$149,690/pr.
This two-chassis, 32Wpc SET monoblock sets new standards in sound reproduction. The ML3 delivers amazing speed plus captures the full harmonic envelope of each instrument. The result is unparalleled tonal neutrality. Surprising, for an SET design, the Lamm can be used with a wide range of loudspeakers, though care must be exercised in impedance and sensitivity matching. PB, 208

Soulution 701
$169,975/pr.
A pair of power amplifiers that cost more than a Mercedes S-Class? Yes, but if you have the dough, there may not be a more musically compelling amplifier on the planet. The massive 701s break new ground in sheer dynamic verve and vivid immediacy. Although not forward-sounding, the 701s convey a sensational lifelike presence in both timbre and dynamics that put them in a class by themselves. And then there's the phenomenal bass that must be heard to be believed. These amplifiers have a bottom-of-the-earth solidity and dynamic impact unlike any other amplifiers. Darker and richer in tonal color than the Constellation Hercules II, but not quite as resolving. The Soulution 701s are mega-priced, but they also deliver mega-performance. RH, 249

darTZeel NHB-468
$258,124/pr.
The NHB-468, which can produce up to 2000 watts, offers a superb combination of beauty and the beast. The beauty is immediately apparent—translucent highs and a rich but never cloying tonality that replicates everything from woodwinds to brass with uncanny fidelity and solidity. The beast arrives on the big stuff, from rap to classical, particularly with power-hungry loudspeakers, which the 468 drives with ease. There is something uncanny, even spooky, about the sheer effortlessness with which the amplifier reproduces the most subtle transient information, especially in the treble. At the same time, its dynamic alacrity means that instruments such as a standup bass sound about as realistic as it gets. Imaging is rock solid. Devoid of any hint of stridency, the 468 provides a surefire recipe for hours of audio enchantment. JHb, 327

Burmester 159
$350,000/pr.
Underneath the massive, elegant casework is 396 pounds of raw amplifier fury that can deliver 1200W into 4 ohms. The amplifier's sonic character was the antithesis of expectations with a highly refined, delicate, liquid, lush, gentle, and grain-free sound. Howev-

Rediscover Music

Technics

The Legacy Continues.

Year after year, Technics products earn the highest praise
from industry editors and home audio enthusiasts alike.
Let us take you on your journey to rediscover music.

2024 Editor's Choice Award Winners: SL-1200G-S, SU-R1000, SL-G700M2, SL-1000R, SL-1500C-K

Hi-Fi Audio Components / Speakers / Turntables / Headphones

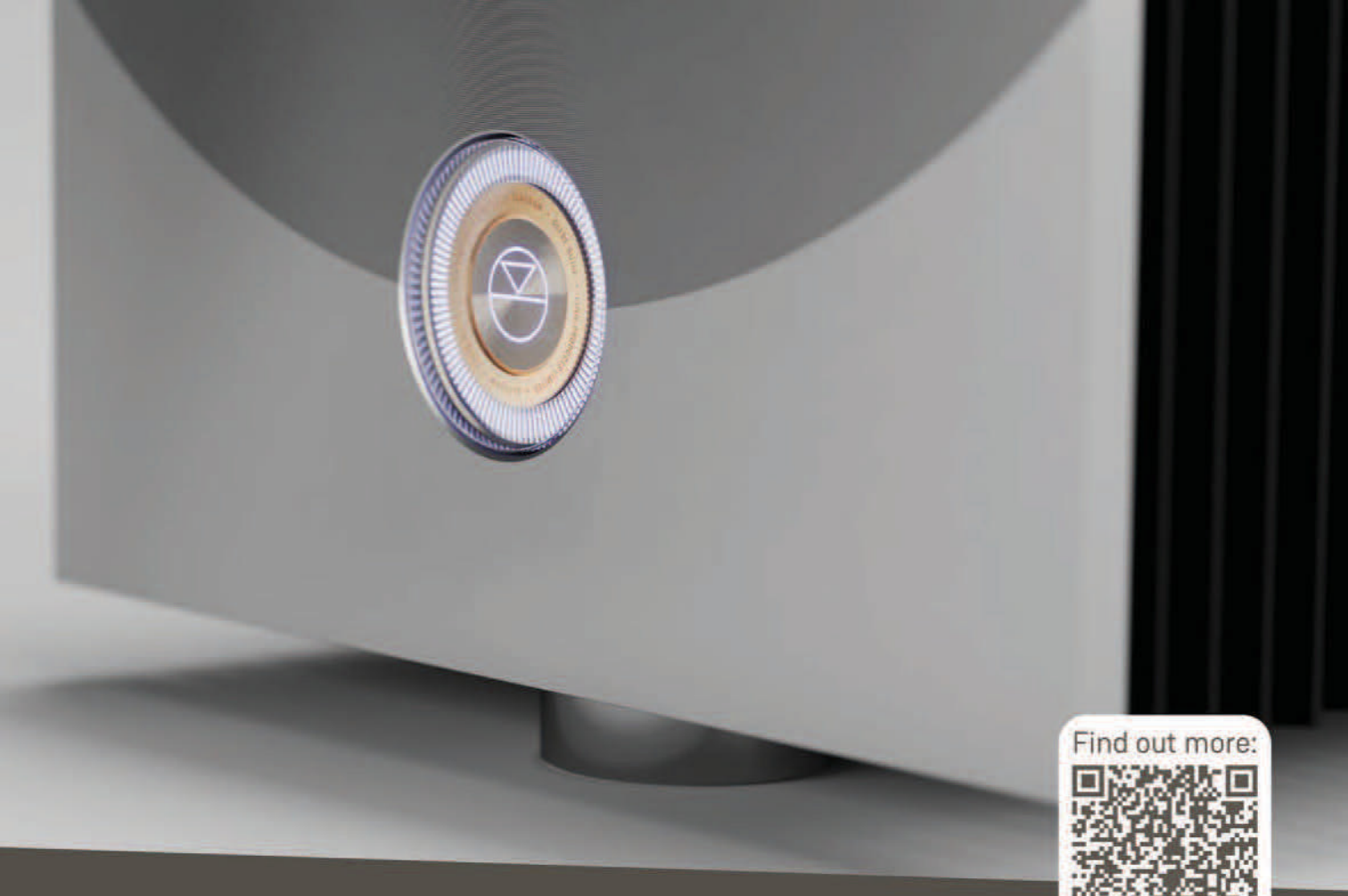
Technics.com @technics.global @technics_global

INTRODUCING

KLIMAX SOLO 800

www.linn.co.uk

LINN



Find out more:

Our all-new, reference mono amplifier delivers absolute linearity under all conditions; even reducing audible distortion from the loudspeaker itself.

Solo 800 features novel and original technologies – such as Adaptive Bias Control and Utopik power – which combine to produce staggeringly low distortion measurements, superb signal-to-noise ratio, and unrivalled efficiency.

Klimax Solo 800 outperforms larger rivals comprehensively.

Book your demonstration at a Linn specialist:

www.linn.co.uk/try-linn

USA

Arizona Scottsdale / Tempe
LMC Home Entertainment

California Los Angeles
Shelley's Stereo

California San Fran / San Diego
Basil Audio

California Santa Rosa
Lavish Audio-Video-Control

Colorado Denver
Soundings Fine Audio Video

Colorado Fort Collins
Audio Alternative

Florida Parkland
Audio Florida

Georgia Atlanta
Sound Image

Illinois Wayne
Next Level HiFi

New Hampshire Nashua
Audio Video Therapy

New York Mount Kisco
Accent on Music

New York New York
Innovative Audio

Oregon Portland
Pearl Audio Video

Texas Dallas
Audio Concepts

Texas Houston
Timbre

Virginia Herndon
Elite Audio Solutions

Washington Bellevue/Seattle
Definitive Audio

CANADA

British Columbia Vancouver
HiFi Centre

Ontario Whitby
Audio by Mark Jones

er, when called upon, the 159 shows its other side—an amplifier capable of seemingly unlimited dynamic capability and majestic authority, even on the most challenging music. The 159 can convey the intimacy of a gentle vocal and the full size, scale, and weight of a symphony orchestra with equal conviction. RH, 333

D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Relentless Epic 1600
$350,000/pr.
The new Relentless Epic is Dan D'Agostino's statement amp. Look under the hood and you can see that no expense has been spared. Over a hundred glistening transistors and a whopping custom transformer that looks like it could power a nuclear submarine are the stars of the show. The Relentless Epic is also anti-globalist—no global feedback is employed. The two sides of each amp perfectly mirror each other for true balanced operation—no bridging of amps here. You often hear reviewers say they turned up the volume and it got louder without compression, but that's not always been Jacob Heilbrunn's experience. In this case, it was. These (1500W into 8 ohms, rising to 6000W into 2 ohms) amps are born to run. Compared to the more stentorian amps out there, the Relentless tends to pad the initial transient slightly, so you're not going to get as hard a hit on trumpet or piano as you might with other superb solid-state amplifiers. At the same time, the Relentless can create a more holistic note, something closer to real life in its palpability and 3-D character. JHb, 301 (Epic version not reviewed)

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS

Under $1000

NAD D 3020 V2
$499
Truly a design for our times, the D 3020 is improbably small and portable and loaded. This 30Wpc integrated offers a 96kHz/24-bit USB input and aptX Bluetooth music-streaming. With a smooth top end, its speed and openness can be truly enthralling. Although there's a little bit of a veil over the sound, the D 3020 need make no apologies. At $499 it is a small miracle of packaging and portability, and a delight to use and listen to. NG, 239

NuForce DDA-120
$499
The DDA-120 was made for audiophiles who need a moderately priced, single-box amp/preamp to connect any conventional digital source to a pair of loudspeakers. If your speakers are at least 88dB sensitive and you can work around the DDA-120's ergonomic limitations, you may find that it is simply the best-integrated amplifier you've heard. (Now includes an analog input.) SS, 229

NAD C 328
$599
NAD calls its new integrated amplifier a "Hybrid Digital DAC Amplifier," a moniker that hints at its digital prowess. The C 328 can handle a wide range of digital sources and, indeed, features a topology that keeps signals in the digital domain until the switching output stage. Although the amp is rated at 50Wpc, Paul Seydor found that the C 328 wasn't lacking for power in real-world situations. The C 328 acquits itself excellently in nuance and resolution. With rock and driving jazz it displays a lot of punch, kick, drive, and swing. Subjectively, noise and distortion are extremely low, the presentation notable for its clarity and articulation without appearing in the least analytical. A tremendous bargain and a worthy successor to NAD's legendary 3020 integrated amplifier. PS, 291

PS Audio Sprout100
$799
Though the updated Sprout100 version's compact, retro-modern form factor remains the same, many changes abound, including a redesign for the mm phonostage and headphone amp, an upgrade to a new ESS Sabre 9016 DAC chip, defeatable bass boost, a tiny indicator LED, and a remote control. Oh, and twice the power: 100Wpc into 4 ohms. We were struck immediately by the Sprout100's ability to coax even more spaciousness, lively musicality, detail, and low-end extension from the Air Tight Bonsais' single drivers. Expect big sound from a sweet, small-footprint, full-featured component with plenty of visual and tactile appeal. JM, 289

Quad Vena II
$995 ($1195 with case)
The Quad Vena II is small and gray with a matte finish, though the optional case adds a very nice gloss. The amp is rated 45Wpc into 8 ohms, and includes a phono section, two analog inputs, a pre-out, and a plethora of digital inputs. The Quad strikes the perfect balance between classic analog inputs and modern digital capabilities. The Vena II is surprisingly engaging with a big, bold, somewhat warm sound, regardless of whether you're in the digital or the analog domain. That flexibility is key to the Vena II, and why it's highly recommended. DK, 302

Marantz PM7000N
$999
The Marantz PM7000N integrated stereo amplifier is a good-sounding product that can shrink audiophile sprawl down to something more manageable without sacrificing what matters most. It's an all-in-one solution that comes equipped with built-in DAC, network streaming, Apple AirPlay, multiple line inputs, multiple digital inputs, and a phono section. Despite having a foot firmly in every camp, its presentation is gracious—an overall solid performer packed with value. Digital is easy to set up, and while the phono section isn't perfect, it reveals plenty of detail and has a nice, engaging sound. DK, 305

$1000–$3000

NuPrime IDA-8
$1099
Essentially, it's a sleek-looking, small-footprint hybrid Class A/Class D integrated amplifier/DAC that combines Class A warmth and resolution with Class D speed, power, and efficiency. The well-conceived IDA-8 delivers substance with plenty of gusto—and does so from an astonishingly quiet background. A great-sounding, stone-cold bargain, and a 2016 Golden Ear Award recipient. JM, 263

NAD C 368
$1199
NAD's C 368 is a great-sounding and forward-looking integrated that will satisfy now and well into the future. The 80Wpc C 368 (240Wpc IHF dynamic power into 4 ohms) incorporates not just a DAC, but a full suite of interchangeable modules thanks to NAD's Modular Design Construction. The C 368 sounds more powerful than its rating, capturing music's continuously changing dynamic level with noteworthy precision and exhibiting a dynamic exuberance typical of NAD equipment. VF, 279

NAD C 3050 LE
$1399 ($1799 with BluOS-D card)
While the limited-edition NAD C 3050 LE swiftly sold out, the standard-edition NAD C 3050 retains all the LE's features, including 100Wpc of continuous power via NAD's HybridDigital UcD amplifier technology, a Texas

Instruments' PCM5242 high-resolution differential DAC (32-bit/384kHz), optional BluOS high-resolution multi-room music streaming, and Dirac Live room correction. Sonically, its power output sounds and feels like more 100W with warmth, weight, and gravity in the midrange and low frequencies. Imaging is stable; transients are crisp and clean. A hint of low-level veiling and some residual dryness shadow the top octaves, but these are modest subtractions. Nicely appointed, cool-looking, great-sounding, what else could it be but a NAD? NG, 341

Rogue Audio Sphinx
$1595 ($1695 w/remote)
Rogue products have, like their moniker suggests, usually gone their own way in design, price, and value. The Sphinx integrated amplifier may be the most roguish of the lot. This is the first Class D amplifier (a hybrid with a pair of 12AU7 tubes in the preamp section) that RD feels offers true world-class sonics. Includes a very fine discrete headphone amp and a phono section that is worth the asking price all by itself. TAS' 2013 Tube Integrated Amplifier of the Year. Ron Doering, 236

Orchard Audio Starkrimson
$1600/pr.
While virtually all Class D amplifiers use off-the-shelf output modules, the diminutive Starkrimson is built from a proprietary circuit of Orchard Audio's own design. With 150W into 8 ohms on tap, the Starkrimson yielded a remarkably transparent soundstage and a spacious presentation. The musical tapestry was vibrant with transients unleashed to their full dynamic potential. What was also endearing was its ability to scale dynamic peaks without changing its tonal character. This was coupled with stunning resolution of complex passages, which left reviewer Dick Olsher thinking that this should not be happening with a $1600-per-stereo pair amplifier. The Starkrimson sounds like a high-definition Class A amplifier, and surely offers a glimpse into the future of Class D amplification. DO, 323

Rotel A14 MK II
$1699
The A14 amplifier has a moving-magnet phonostage, a very capable DAC that can play DSD and (some) PCM music files, an aptX Bluetooth connection, a front-panel USB connection so you can play the music stored on your smartphone, and a headphone amplifier to drive your favorite cans. It's rated at 80Wpc. The A14 has a punchy bass with detailed mids and sweet highs. It also does a good job of tracking rapid changes in dynamics. Most surprising, however, is the truly excellent soundstaging, which competes well against some of the most expensive gear available today. VF, 273

Naim Nait 5si
$1999
One of the great bargains in high-end audio, this latest version of the Nait 5i brings more than a taste of expensive separates to a mid-priced integrated amplifier. The Nait is sweet without sounding rolled-off, presents a huge sense of space, tremendous separation of images, and, most importantly, sounds like music. In production in updated versions since the 1980s (RH reviewed the Nait 2 in 1989), the Nait's iconic status is deserved. (Recently updated to the 5si.) RH, 183

NAD C399
$2199 ($2599 as reviewed with BluOS-D Module)
NAD'S C399 is a streaming integrated amplifier that incorporates too many functions and features to summarize in a capsule. The main talking points are a superb on-board DAC with full MQA capability, an equally superb moving-magnet phonostage, and a pair of slots on the back for modular upgrades to keep the unit future-proof (digitally speaking). It was reviewed with BluOS-D module that incorporates Dirac Live, a new digital-signal-processing room/loudspeaker-correction technology. Features aside, most people will be buying this for its basic function as an integrated amplifier. Its 180 watts per channel, the amplifier section deriving from NAD's Hypex HybridDigital nCore Class D circuit, are capable of driving almost any home

speaker system to fearsome levels with inaudibly low noise and distortion. Considered strictly as an integrated amplifier, the C399 is a true high-end component of superior performance. PS, 333

NAD M10 V2
$2499

The beautiful extruded-aluminum chassis'd and Gorilla Glass-topped M10 all-in-one is compatible with Roon, Airplay2, Amazon, Spotify, Tidal, and Qobuz. The system is 24/192 PCM-compatible, supports FLAC, WAV, MP3, and AAC, and is Bluetooth aptX HD-compatible as well. It utilizes a Hypex nCore Class D amplifier to very good effect, and offers Dirac Live LE room correction. No matter the source, the Master Series M10 had toes tapping from the comfort of a listening chair with total control from a smartphone. It is attractive, luxurious, simple to set up and use, small, ridiculously well featured, and wonderfully enjoyable to listen to. MC, 298 (new V2 not reviewed)

Cabasse Abyss
$2700

The Abyss offers the usual streaming options and 120Wpc of Class D amplification. It is set apart from other streaming amplifiers by an abundance of DSP options, some very unusual, even unique, including speaker-position compensation, adjustments for general room acoustics, and a loudness compensation (for Fletcher-Munson effects), which tracks the music in a detailed way. The Abyss is programmed with phase- and amplitude-correction programs tailored to a range of Cabasse speakers, as well as a generic setting that works with most speakers. An amazing package, all controllable remotely by an app. REG, forthcoming

$3000 and above

Cambridge Evo 150
$3249

The Evo 150 is an all-in-one integrated amplifier that packs just about every feature imaginable into its little frame. It outputs 150Wpc and utilizes Hypex NCore Class D amplification, which means it has plenty of power and runs cool and efficient. The Evo 150 has a ton of input options, including a phonostage (mm only), RCA, balanced XLR, optical, coaxial, and HDMI ARC for TV control. It can parse, pull, decode, and play just about any file type or service available, which might be overwhelming if the Evo weren't so simple and intuitive to use. Sonically, the Evo's signature was crisp, clean, and neutral in most applications, almost surprisingly so. Bass drums had punch, guitars had weight, mids were crunchy and sharp. It's the sort of box that could anchor a new system or replace an aging one and will sound fantastic doing it. DK, 338

Roksan Attessa
$3399

Roksan's all-new, in-house, 80Wpc design embodies where today's marketplace lives. Attessa is its first offering with integrated DAC plus network streaming capability and a fine mm phonostage too. Sonic performance registered high scores across all genres of music. It was grain-free, non-edgy and wasn't apt to shade or spotlight particular frequency bands. It maintained a ripe and natural midrange, a weighted tonality, a firm and controlled bass, and a smooth if slightly drier top-end. Throughout, there was a spotless untrammeled clarity to every note. Attessa was especially impressive imparting dynamic energy in both the macro and micro senses. Looks, ergonomics, and performance. In NG's book, a real sleeper. NG, 335

Rotel RA-1592 MKII
$3399

The MKII version of the venerable RA-1592, this 200Wpc Class AB powerhouse offered rock-solid musicality across all criteria, with a lush velvety character and a weighty, well-defined bottom end. The treble octaves were clean, relatively free of clutter or grain. At the treble extremes there was a minor reduction of air and harmonic bloom and a scarcity of depth cues, but these were trivial subtractions. Plenty flexible, the MKII supports both traditional Bluetooth streaming plus aptX™ and AAC high-quality audio streaming, as well as MQA and MQA Studio decoding and rendering. Exactly what TAS has come to expect of an experienced, 50-year-old brand that knows the audio terrain like few competitors in this segment. NG, 327

Rogue Audio Cronus Magnum III
$3495

Rogue's 90Wpc Cronus Magnum features an Electro Harmonix KT90 tube. Striking a balance between elegance and power, its dynamic scaling is very fine—lilting with chamber music, muscular with rock and orchestral. The Magnum is also remarkably transparent to sources in a way very unusual in its price class. WG, 333

Vincent SV-737
$3499

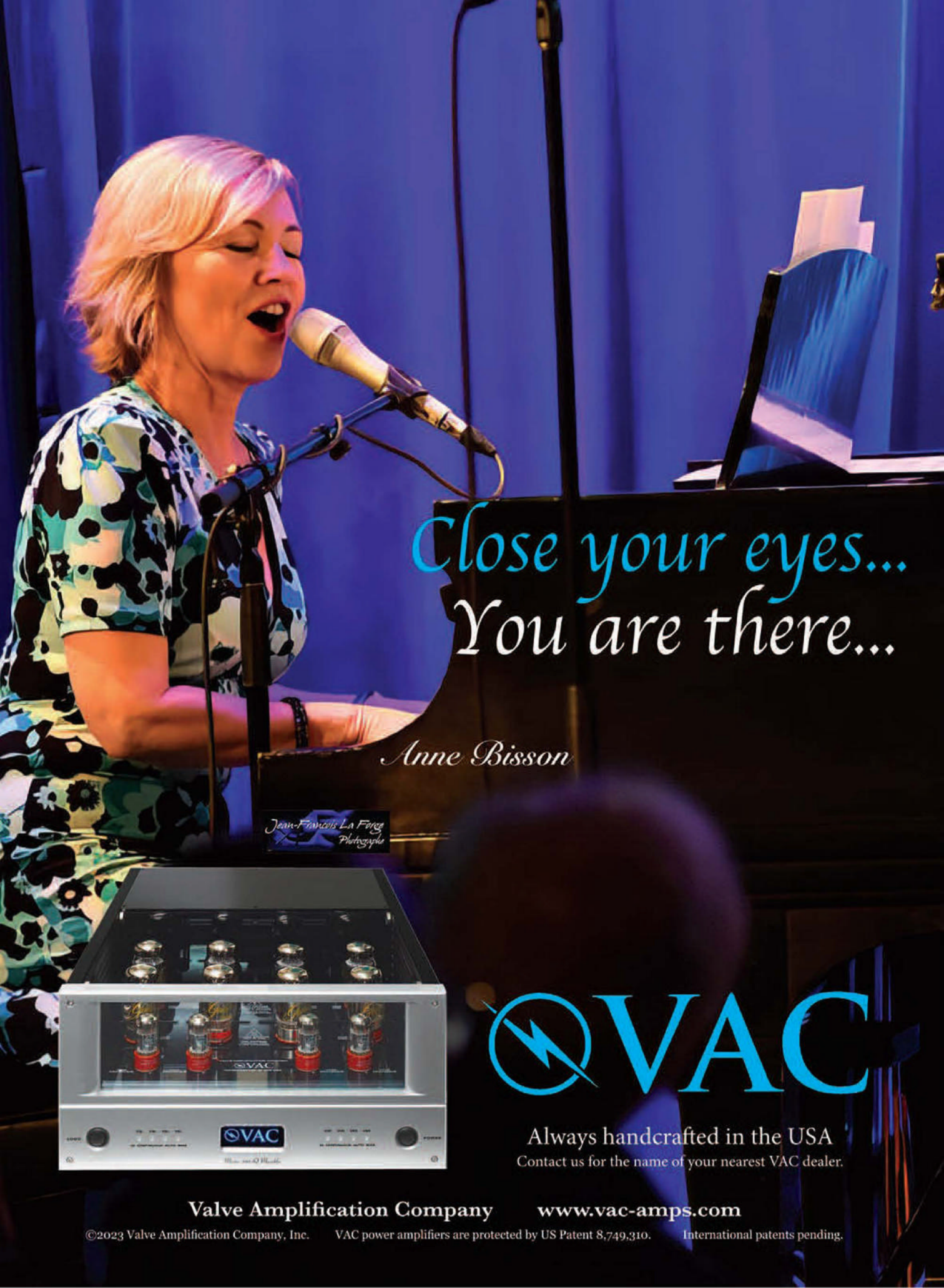
A large, beefy, classic-looking hybrid amp should appeal to those who want a compromise between a separate power amp and preamp and the economy and simplicity of an integrated. Rated at 180Wpc into 8 ohms, and 300Wpc into 4 ohms, the 737 boasts a tube preamp section and a Class AB solid-state power amp. Running in pure Class A up to 10W ensures the sound is particularly fine at low listening levels. MK concluded that, sonically, it lived up to its marketing claims of combining the best of both worlds, tube and transistor. It bettered all lower-priced choices, proving itself to be a good value. It also includes a good DAC and wireless streaming, though the streaming app is not as versatile as others and may not be able to access any lossless service other than Tidal. MK, 327

Marantz PM-KI Ruby
$3999

With its companion SA-KI SACD/CD player, the PM-KI constitutes the famous Ken Ishiwata's valedictory work, representing four decades of electronics that place musical beauty and naturalness over laboratory accuracy. Ecumenical when it comes to tubes versus transistors, the PM-KI exhibits some of the warmth, richness, and dimensionality traditionally associated with tubes together with the precision, definition, transient attack, bottom-end extension, and impact for which solid-state is prized, while its 100Wpc should satisfy all but head-bangers. Its onboard mm/mc phonostage is so good it obviates the need for a separate one. Ishiwata considers the Ruby components his finest work. PS, 302

Moon ACE
$4200

Moon breathes some sex appeal into the all-in-one segment. Its ACE sports grippy power and a potpourri of connectivity that spans analog, digital, and network platforms. Sonically, the ACE has vivid, midrange-centric, rich, uncolored tonality laden with impressive dynamic



Always handcrafted in the USA

Contact us for the name of your nearest VAC dealer.

Valve Amplification Company **www.vac-amps.com**

©2023 Valve Amplification Company, Inc. VAC power amplifiers are protected by US Patent 8,749,310. International patents pending.

resolve, quicksilver speed, good low-level transparency, and nicely focused imaging. Bass response, both in extension and pitch control, is very good, although the ACE will soften impacts slightly depending on output demands and speaker sensitivity. Its well-executed Mind app for smart devices operated seamlessly with solid, intuitive graphics. All-in-one solutions are a deceptively complicated business, but the ACE makes it look easy. NG, 276

Rogers High Fidelity 65V-1
$4200
Classic tube power meets modern technology in aerospace engineer Roger Gibboni's designs—there's a free iOS app enabling control of volume, source switching, and operating mode (Ultralinear or triode). Although intended as an entry-level offering, this integrated is not a watered-down version of one of Rogers' big push-pull amps. In fact, it's something totally different—a single-ended design using one EL34 power pentode per channel (upon request the amp can be shipped with a KT88 beam power tube). Reviewer DO says you really would be hard-pressed to find a more cogent and emotion-packed midrange. DO, 283

Icon Audio Stereo 40 MkIV
$4500 ($5295 Signature edition)
The MkIV is the latest version of David Shaw's seminal amplifier design. It provides a highly flexible palette of tonal shadings via its Ultralinear and triode modes, and its negative feedback settings. It is good looking and easy to bias. The Signature version incorporates an upscale tube complement and Mundorf coupling caps. It delivers glorious tube sound and excels in resolving layers of orchestration, while allowing low-level detail to float to the surface naturally without any help from gratuitous upper midrange brightness. It is far more revealing than that great and beloved classic UL amplifier, the Dynaco ST-70. DO ranks it among the elite of integrated amps he has reviewed regardless of price. DO, 335

Gold Note IS-1000 Deluxe
$6299
A true multi-discipline, 125Wpc Class AB, DAC-equipped, network-audio performer that summoned a neutral personality throughout the greater middle range with intimations of extra bloom and body in the mid and upper bass. Orchestral music possessed a firm, of-a-piece signature that was detailed and layered yet stable and immersive. Treble octaves were smooth and non-fatiguing. Transient behavior was unforced and natural, rather than overly etched and prickly. Italy's Gold Note fulfills the expectations of enthusiasts across the generations by having produced a modern, musically engaging, and highly configurable amp. NG, 300

Naim Uniti Nova
$6899
The Naim Uniti Nova is an 80Wpc integrated amplifier/digital player for the 21st century. Connectivity options include every input imaginable plus wireless streaming via Chromecast, Airplay, Bluetooth (aptX HD), or Wi-Fi (2.4 or 5GHz), and UPnP streaming via its Ethernet connection. The Uniti is also a Roon endpoint. If you need a modern single-box solution that can play from Dad's NAS drive or Sis' smartphone (and be controlled by any smartphone in the house), the Naim Uniti Nova can make the transition from hair-shirt audiophilia to silk-shirt convenience as painless, musically expansive, and audiophile-approved as possible. SS, 284

Bryston B1353
$6995
Bryston has replaced its well-regarded B100 with the more powerful B135^3, which uses preamp elements from Bryston's SP-3 as well as significant technology from its SST^2 power amps. With ample analog inputs, an optional mm phono section, and an on-board DAC, it is a versatile unit with enough power (135W) to drive even somewhat tricky speakers. High build-quality, versatility, and overall sonic immediacy and clarity are its strong points. KM, 233

HiFi Rose RA180
$6995
With a sort of retro-steam punk faceplate, the RA180 is quite the aesthetic departure from the very modern and minimalistic designs of HiFi Rose's streamers. Reviewer Rives Bird found it to be beautiful in both looks and sound quality. This tonally neutral, solid-state, 400W (bridged), GaN-based design can drive even the most difficult loads. Via incredibly flexible set-up options it can also be configured to bi-amp speakers. Like other HiFi Rose products, the RA180 delivers a very high value. Rives Bird, 334

Canor Audio AI 1.10
$6999
This pure Class A integrated amplifier is one of Slovakia's best kept secrets. Power delivery is 40Wpc in Ultralinear mode from a pair of KT88 beam tetrodes. The KT88s are given full scope of expression via excellent output-iron and a well-filtered power supply. Expect exceptional soundstage transparency combined with transient clarity—attributes that should keep you content for a lifetime. Resolution of low-level detail is as good as it gets for any tube amp at this or any price point. Ultralinear/triode switching offers the choice of two sonic personalities. Ultralinear mode was DO's clear preference based on greater dynamic conviction and a tonal balance whose center of gravity was squarely in the orchestral power range. On all counts, the Canor AI 1.10 is a superlative amp. It is built to last, and its intelligent warm-up and cool-down cycles will keep the tube complement going strong for years to come. DO, 330

PrimaLuna EVO 300 Hybrid
$7295
The EVO 300 is the result of a collaborative effort between PrimaLuna and sister company Floyd Design. It represents a departure from PrimaLuna's all-valve amplifiers, as it marries the EVO 300 preamp's 12AU7 front end with a MOSFET power stage. The goal was to combine the virtues of tube and solid-state amplification. Expect fabulous dynamics and low-end solidity, but the real magic is in the integration of the tube and solid-state sections. Excellent performance at the frequency extremes is coupled with considerable tube magic. Especially with analog sources, soundstage depth and width perspectives are remarkably spacious. This is the hybrid amp DO has been waiting decades for. It is neither bright nor texturally challenged; rather, it exudes musical finesse. And that means 3D soundstaging and the ability to wow the listener with the music's fire and drama. A Dutch treat for the discriminating music lover. DO, 326

Yamaha A-S3200
$7999
As an integrated amplifier, the 130Wpc A-S3200 produces a polished, palpable soundstage whose clarity and transparency are breathtaking when used with loudspeakers capable of showcasing its performance. With its smooth, near-flat tonal balance and exceptional resolution, in both amplitude and frequency response, it realistically characterizes recordings, its "natural sound" moniker perhaps closer to reality than mere marketing hype. If you are in the market for, or even just interested in, a high-quality integrated amplifier of this intent and power level, PS heartily recommends you audition the Yamaha A-S3200. PS, 270

Rogers High Fidelity EHF-100 MK2
$8400
The Rogers is a two-channel tube integrated amplifier rated at 65 Class A watts per channel. A classic integrated, it includes no DAC or phono section. Harmonically rich and dynamically powerful, the EHF-100 MK2 proved satisfying to listen to over long periods, with a smoothly extended high end, a detailed, realistic midrange, tight bass, and enough power to drive a wide variety of speakers. If you've been tempted by a tube amplifier but aren't sure you want the maintenance hassle that comes with many of them, the Rogers EHF-100 MK2 is about as easy to maintain as a tube amplifier can be, thanks to automated bias adjustment, and offers the typical sonic advantages of a tube amp with the best warranty (lifetime and transferable) in the industry. VF, 265

Bel Canto E1X Integrated
$8500
According to Bel Canto's designer John Stronczer, "the E1X Integrated shares its architectural approach with the Bel Canto Black system design." The 180Wpc Class D E1X utilizes a multi-circuit-board layout. Multiple processors reside on the AMiP board and control the USB, Ethernet, AES, SPDIF, TosLink, and analog input functions, while a dedicated processor contains the MQA decode and rendering function, as well as the MQA-derived filters. The E1X is, in every respect, Bel Canto's best value. It's a high-performance unit that delivers sonics on a par with a combination of reference components at double the cost. SS, 308

Aesthetix Mimas
$9000 (phono card option, $1250; digital card option, $1250)
The Mimas is an old musical soul and not just another high-performance entrant in the *über*-integrated amp sweeps. Beyond its muscular 150Wpc output, this first integrated from Aesthetix can express the full palette of tonal and textural colors with harmonic ripeness. It embodies many of the classic sonic virtues of the golden era of tubes, but with the ease, control, and extension that are the hallmarks of today's finest solid-state. Its character has hints of classic midrange warmth and airy treble sweetness with bass response that is as nimble as it is formidable. For vinyl enthusiasts the optional and super-silent modular mm/mc dual input phonostage is a must. The very definition of what we all seek from an integrated amplifier. Includes remote control. NG, 294, 308

Norma Audio Revo IPA-140
$9600
Marrying the engineering chops of Norma Audio founder Enrico Rossi with the industrial design eye of Livio Cucuzza, the latest incarnation of the Revo IPA-140 is a stunner. Delivering 140Wpc, the Revo is powerful enough to effortlessly drive the great majority of today's speakers, but it's inherently neutral balance, top-to-bottom coherence, and understated sonic elegance mean it's no brute when it comes to expressing musical nuance. For those seeking the compact footprint of an integrated, versatility of choice with input options, and an amplifier to live with over the long term, the Norma Revo IPA-140 is something of a must-audition. WG, 343

Technics SU-R1000
$9999
The 150Wpc Technics SU-R1000 integrated amplifier with built-in 384/32 PCM/22.4MHz DSD DAC and mm/mc phonostage is one of the most innovative and best-sounding pieces of electronics AHC has had the opportunity to audition in recent years. It shows how quickly integrated amplifiers are evolving and provides an exceptional mix of well-engineered features in a single unit. A product that is truly competitive with high-end separates and an excellent buy, even at its price. AHC, 317

Devialet Expert 220 Pro
$10,000
This highly advanced and innovative integrated amplifier with built-in streaming support produces 220Wpc (into 6 ohms) from its patented hybrid Class A/Class D output stage. The slim and stylish chassis is packed with sophisticated technology, among which is Speaker Active Matching (SAM) that monitors speaker behavior and changes the drive signal on the fly to correct for speaker shortcomings. (SAM works only with select speakers; check Devialet's website for the list.) With a compatible speaker, SAM sounds fabulous. REG wrote: "I have seldom been so excited about an audio development as I was when hearing a middle-sized loudspeaker put out such a convincing facsimile of an orchestra at full tilt." REG, 298

Moon 600i v2
$10,500
Building on a long tradition of great-sounding integrated amplifiers, Simaudio has hit one out of the park with the 600i. This dual-mono, fully differential integrated delivers the sound quality of expensive separates with the convenience of a single chassis. The 600i's presentation is rock-solid in the bass, unbelievably dynamic, with a slight forwardness in the midrange that increases lifelike presence. RH, 210

MBL Cadenza C51
$11,600
With its soft, understated lines, svelte controls, versatile connectivity, and jewelry-like finish, it's easy to misjudge the depth, complexity, and sonic excellence of the C51—a 180Wpc, modified Class D tour de force. It has the touch of the classicist in the emphasis it places on the finest inner details; its resolution of acoustic space is almost eerie in specificity. Its top-end is top-notch—airily extended with none of early-era Class D's darkness and constriction. A triumph in its category. NG, 243

Balanced Audio Technology VK80i
$11,995
BAT's first all-tube integrated is a stunning piece of industrial art that delivers over 55Wpc of pure triode power. The

design combines the 6SN7 dual triode with the unique 6C33C-B power triode, originally designed for avionics applications and famously used as a regulator tube in the radio communications system of the MIG-25 fighter jet. The focus is on simplicity of operation and reliability, hence the automatic-bias circuitry. It sounds far more powerful than a comparable KT88-based amp and shifts gears without changing its sonic character. There is no perceptible textural grain or brightness even when it is driven hard. It is above all else a superb demonstration of triode power that offers a happy escape from the garden-variety push-pull beam-power or pentode amp. DO, 319

Pass Labs INT-250
$12,600
With 250Wpc (500Wpc into 4 ohms), the muscular INT-250 embodies effortless dynamics, ultra-wide bandwidth, superb low-end control and grip, and effortless highs. Its soothing and seductive sonics are an ideal companion for analog LP playback—this Pass integrated just makes you want to spin vinyl endlessly. With musicality that is second to none, it operates at the outer limits of what is currently possible in today's integrated amplifier marketplace. NG, 263

T+A PA 2500 R Series
$13,750
The highboy integrated amp in T+A's vaunted R series, the 140Wpc PA 2500 R is a dual-mono, fully balanced, high-voltage design with a Class AB output stage biased into Class A for the first 20–25 watts. Clean and authoritative, and easy to operate, the PA 2500 R conveys the sense of a well-oiled machine. Its sonic signature is one of balance and control, with musical images rooted in space and vocals models of stability. Its most identifiable traits are wideband spectral response and dynamic extroversion. The PA 2500 R delivers big, high-intensity wattage that never seems to waver in responsiveness and extension regardless of load. Includes an excellent phonostage. *Wunderbar*! NG, 275

Esoteric F-03A
$14,000
If you lust for Esoteric's ultra-expensive Grandioso system but don't have the requisite massive dough or massive space, the F-03A is the solution. This integrated is designed and built to the highest standards, with a modest power output of 30Wpc (60Wpc into 4 ohms). But those 30W are Class A, and some of the sweetest you'll ever hear. When driving a speaker of appropriate sensitivity, the F-03A delivers the harmonic richness, transient fidelity, transparency, and musical resolution of much more expensive separates. This is ultra-high-end on a smaller scale. RH, 289

Boulder Amplifiers 866
$14,250 ($15,750 w/DAC)
While we could debate whether trickle-down economics is a thing, the 866 serves as proof that trickle-down technology is real. Beginning with the digital side, the 866 has inherited its systematic technology from Boulder's 2120 DAC. The 866 can be configured at the factory in two ways. The basic version is analog only, with three balanced XLR analog inputs. The digital version has a built-in DAC with SPDIF, TosLink, and AES/EBU inputs, as well as a Raspberry Pi/Ethernet streaming connection, so it will support Roon, Tidal, Qobuz, and other streaming sources. If you've been a fan of Boulder's sonics and build-quality but unable to field the space for their generously sized components, the new 866 could be the component of your dreams, made into reality. SS, 327

Western Electric 91E
$14,999
The Western Electric 91E is a unique combination of old and new. The heart of the unit is the newly manufactured (in the USA) WE 300B tube, which is made to the same standards and specifications as the original WE 300B tube, but with some enhancements to the manufacturing process that increase the tube's longevity. The 91E has all of the sonic benefits of the 300B without the shortcomings: SET with 20 watts per channel, well-controlled bass, a wonderful top end, and a five-year warranty on the 300B tubes. The 91E unit is groundbreaking, delivering an incredibly high standard at a relatively affordable price. RB was so impressed he purchased the review sample and listens to it daily. RB, 334

Rogers High Fidelity KWM-88 Corona
$16,500
This integrated amplifier combines the absolute best qualities of a tube linestage and tube power amp in a single chassis. It throws in some useful technology in the form of an app that enables your smartphone to serve as the remote control, and automatic bias setting for power output tubes. Ships with either KT88 or KT150 tubes (your choice, same power). With plenty of power to drive most speakers, the Corona delivers the best bass VF has heard from a tube amplifier. What few flaws it has are quite minor. VF, 302

Jadis DA88S MkII
$17,700
The 60-watt Jadis integrated amplifier is no wallflower. An explosive performer it lays down the law with Jesuitical force. While the DA88S does not produce the very deepest notes, it excels at delivering prodigious and harmonically rich bottom end that has a propulsive quality. For all its warmth and bloom, the Jadis never truncates or blunts transients. It delivers cymbal swishes or the blat of a trumpet with extreme precision. Above all, it is the sheer wallop this unit delivers that distinguishes it from many of its competitors. JHb, 253

AVM CS 8.3 Black Edition
$18,995
The CS 8.3 from the German firm AVM is an integrated amplifier, utilizing switching technology for the amplification and tube topology for the linestage, coupled with an integrated streamer, all in one chassis. This combination provides 500Wpc (into 4 ohms) and has ample headroom for just about any speaker. Happily, the sound quality is outstanding. Having this piece in the living room was a pleasure, not only from a sonic standpoint but from a simplicity standpoint. The understated cosmetics made it a good addition, and it performed with German precision, though that precision never got in the way of the music. Reviewer RB felt AVM extracted the best of tubes and solid-stage electronics, always drawing him into the music. If fewer boxes are of value to you and this unit is within budget, it is a must on the audition list. RB, 342

Constellation Inspiration 1.0
$19,000
The firm's most affordable effort and the third entry in Constellation's Inspiration Series, the 100Wpc Integrated

Clarisys Audio

Clarisys Audio Minuet

Clarisys Audio Studio

Clarisys Audio Auditorium

Experience
the real sound of music

Dealer Inquiries Welcome!

www.clarisysaudiousa.com
941-932-0282

FOR SALES VISIT SUNCOAST Audio WWW.SUNCOASTAUDIO.COM

1.0 has a tonal signature that is ever-so-slightly shaded to the cooler side of neutral; dynamically, it doesn't give an inch to suppress or soften transients. Treble performance is equally exacting but open, with hints of air and sweetness and not a trace of grain. Unmistakably Constellation in its elegant, matte-finish aluminum casework and distinctive cross-drilled side panels, the Inspiration 1.0 is nothing short of a new high for Constellation's entry level. NG, 283

D'Agostino Progression
$20,950–$30,100
This beautifully made integrated amplifier brings the performance and gorgeous chassis design of D'Agostino's separates into a single compact but highly capable unit. It delivers 200Wpc into 8 ohms, and in true D'Agostino fashion, can double its output power into a 4-ohm load. This makes it ideal for driving current-hungry low-impedance speakers. The Progression can be had as a traditional integrated amplifier ($20,950) or with additional capabilities by adding a streaming DAC module ($7000) and a phono module ($2200). The digital module has an extensive array of inputs, and the phono module offers a wide range of cartridge-loading options with a fixed 60dB of gain. The amplifier and optional streamer are extremely quiet, with outstanding detail retrieval. The Progression clearly resolved timbral and spatial differences between recordings and different digital formats, particularly during loud and complex passages (think Mahler's Eighth). AHC, 346

Thrax Signature
$21,500 (includes DAC and phonostage)
This very-high-end, all-tube integrated amplifier from Bulgaria sports a modular construction that allows you to tailor the product to your needs or to upgrade as your system expands.. Fully loaded with DAC and phonostage, the Enyo comes in at $21,500. Although compact, the unit weighs 60 pounds, and delivers a solid 50Wpc. The phono, digital, high-level-analog, preamp, and power-amplifier sections all offer high sound quality, and there is consistent voicing in the digital and phono modules. AHC, 319

Soulution 330
$25,975 ($3975 Phono Module, $6500 DAC Module)
High-end audio is so often about compromises, trading one characteristic for another. What sets the Soulution 330 integrated apart is its ability to strike just the right balance of musical elements without compromise—and to manage to do so across so many recordings and styles. The company has somehow succeeded in keeping many of its best sonic characteristics, while paring down parts and pricing. This integrated gets out of the way of the music in the right ways, but also delivers the right stuff. The exquisite Soulution 330 may still cost a pretty penny (especially if you add the superb, optional phonostage or DAC boards), but if you have the coin, we highly recommend auditioning it. JM, 294

Absolare Integrated
$26,500 (Signature $34,500)
This hybrid amplifier combines the tube preamp stage of Absolare's superb Passion preamplifier with a newly designed 150Wpc solid-state output stage. Despite the transistors, the Integrated sounds remarkably like a pure-tube design—and not just any tube design. Specifically, the Integrated delivers much of the sonic character of Absolare's Passion SET power amplifier, with a richness of texture, harmonic density, and a gorgeous and grain-free midrange that make this amplifier special. Beautiful leather-clad casework and minimalist controls exude class and elegance. RH, 280

Ypsilon Phaethon
$27,000
Ypsilon has brilliantly grafted the electronic DNA from its flagship Aelius monoblocks and PST100mk2 preamp into its sole integrated amp. The result is a 110Wpc hybrid analog amplifier utilizing only three active gain stages. Few others capture the earthy sense of "being there" like the Phaethon. It does this with wide color and velvety textural contrasts, micro-detailing, harmonics, and a vise-like grip. Quality of construction is Herculean—70 heroic pounds of satin-finished aluminum and heat-sinking that would take the demigod himself to lug up Mt. Olympus. Includes a remote control, plus four inputs. NG, 278

Goldmund Telos 590 Nextgen II
$29,750
In direct comparison with an exceptional preamp and amp that cost more than *four* times as much as it does, the $30k Goldmund Telos 590 Nextgen II didn't just hold its own; it excelled, particularly in the bottom octaves, where it killed. When you add to this the fact that the 215Wpc into 8 ohms (350Wpc+ into 4) 590 II comes with an excellent built-in 384k/DSD128 DAC, it's a single-box package that's quite attractive—especially if astounding speed, neutrality, resolution, and realism are your priorities. Pity it doesn't come with provision for a built-in phonostage or more than one output (so you could connect to speakers and subs simultaneously). Still and all, one of the best integrateds Old Graybeard has heard. JV, 316

Vitus Audio SIA-025 MkII
$30,000
Conventional wisdom states that integrated amps are hopelessly compromised at birth. Vitus Audio obviously didn't get this memo when it created the SIA-25. Built to the same Olympian standards as its preamps and amps, this 25Wpc Class A (on-the-fly switching to 100Wpc Class AB) integrated gives you the best of separates in a single chassis—liquidity, presence, a 3-D soundstage, and the finest gradations of timbre and dynamics. It may not fill a cathedral (unless horns are your thing), but the SIA-25 is the pinnacle of a breed never again to be underestimated. NG, 218 (MkII version not yet reviewed)

Constellation Argo
$36,500
The Argo integrated amplifier's mission is to deliver the classic Constellation sound at a lower price point. To accomplish this, Constellation's designers merged two existing Performance Series (one down from the ultimate Reference Series) components: the Virgo II preamplifier and half of a Centaur II power amp. The splicing was a solid success, as evidenced by the Argo's seductive-yet-propulsive, forgiving-yet-detailed sound. Timbres are beautifully complex from top to bottom. Soon the Argo will support a phonostage and a DAC card, adding to its already impressive versatility and value. AT, 255

REIMAGINING CLASS [A] AMPLIFICATION

MEET DAVID

WestminsterLab

REI **MONO**BLOCK AMPLIFIER

hear THIS

+1 (949) 467-9808
www.HearThis.us

Please join **WestminsterLab**, **Von Schweikert Audio** and **Lampizator**
Suite #1621 | AXPONA EXPO | April 12-14

CH Precision I1
$38,000–$53,000, depending on input/output configuration
Though dubbed an integrated amplifier, CH Precision's I1 barely resembles typical members of that ilk. Its modular nature allows users to configure it to handle virtually any combination of digital inputs, analog inputs, streaming audio, even a moving-coil cartridge. Moreover, the I1's sound quality is every bit as sonically and musically revelatory as that of far more expensive CH standalone components, several of which it incorporates virtually intact. Dynamics, in particular, are extraordinary, and the excellent phono card obviates the need for an external phonostage. Overall, it's hard to think of another $50k electronics choice—either integrated or separates—that boasts the same pedigree, versatility, footprint, value proposition, and sonics. AT, 289

VAC Statement 450i iQ
$150,000
The epitome of "form following function" electronic design, the Statement 450i iQ integrated amplifier sets new standards for the product class, and not just for tube-based designs. Its abilities to accurately render tonality, with its complex harmonic structure and texture, its broadband transparency, its astonishingly unconstrained transient fidelity, and its exceptional low-frequency performance make it the most accomplished offering in its class. If you think tube-based amplification can't compete with, let alone compare to, solid-state power, go hear the 450i. Its exceptional clarity, superb resolution, unflappable transient fidelity, unswervingly authentic tone, and virtually perfect broadband pitch definition are only closely matched by some mega solid-state amplifiers. GW, 305

PREAMPLIFIERS

Under $2000

Schiit Audio Freya+
$849–$1099
The Freya+ is a tube-based preamplifier with three output modes: passive, solid-state, and tube (for that sweet, syrupy tube sound). The tube stage is surprisingly quiet and adds just enough tubey magic. There are five inputs, two balanced and three unbalanced, along with one balanced output and two unbalanced outputs. The Freya+ generally sounded best in tube mode, though the solid-state buffer was no slouch. Mids were particularly focused and sweet, while bass remained tight and impactful. Overall, a flexible and solid preamp. DK, 309

NuPrime AMG PRA
$1895
The AMG PRA is a compact box with two knobs on the front and an LED indicator for channel and volume. The left knob controls the loudness-compensation feature, and the right knob switches between standby mode, line inputs, and adjusts volume. On the back, the STA includes one set of balanced inputs and three unbalanced RCAs along with a balanced and unbalanced RCA out. The STA's deep and quiet noise floor allows music to absolutely shine with crispness and dynamism. Its flexibility would work well in multiple setups. Sounds particularly good with the NuPrime AMG STA. 319

$2000–$5000

Atma-Sphere UV-1
$2100 ($2500 w/mm; $2990 w/LOMC phono)
Intended as a cost-effective entry-level preamp, in its basic form as a line preamp, a single 6SN7 dual triode is used per channel. The line section delivers on the promise of the 6SN7 with a big tone, authoritative midrange, and excellent feel for spatial detail. Sonically, the UV-1 occupies the middle ground between vintage and modern tube sound. It abandons absolute neutrality in favor of a bold and assertive midrange replete with wonderful tonal color saturation. Deserves a serious listen at the under-$3k price point. DO, 258

Benchmark Media LA4
$2950 ($3050 with remote; HPA4, $3499 adds headphone amp)
The LA4 comes closer to measured and measurable perfection than any audio product in any category PS has ever reviewed, owned, or heard. It has lower distortion and noise than any electronic component known to him, and its transparency is without equal in his experience, with no sonic signature he can identify. Its dynamic range is likewise at the highest state of the art. An amazing 256-step volume control maintains 0.5dB/step resolution and flawless channel-tracking at any setting throughout its range. PS's new reference. PS, 311

Icon Audio LA4 MkIII Signature
$3150 (standard version, $2495)
The LA4's classic recipe consists of a 6SN7 gain stage, a tube buffer, a tube-rectified power supply, and point-to-point wiring. This elemental combination, together with excellent engineering, makes the LA4 Signature into a formidable line preamp. Tonal colors are reproduced with superb fidelity, vibrant and engaging. Dynamic shadings are nicely drawn out from soft to very loud. Although the stock tube complement isn't particularly romantic sounding, it is responsible for exceptional bass definition and iconic 3D rendering of the soundstage. The LA4's most compelling sonic attribute is tonal gravitas—an authoritative portrayal of the lower midrange, delivered with realistic tonal density. In all, the LA4 offers exceptional sound quality that does justice to the sonic promise of the 6SN7. DO, 322

Rogue Audio RP-5 V2/RP-7
$3995/$4995
Combining classic vacuum-tube heritage with micro-processor control is Rogue's recipe for one satisfying and affordable preamp. The RP-5 brought to bear rich color saturation and tonal liquidity and presented a natural clarity that rang truthful. It established an authentic sense of dimension and spaciousness specific to each image. The treble was nicely extended, quick, and abundant with harmonic information. Bass performance was authoritative, controlled, and yet also somewhat warm and bloomy. The RP-7 is the balanced version of the RP-5 and has taken the RP-5's voice and further burnished its overall performance adding new solidity and control in the bass and lower midrange. Not just a "signature" edition, the Rogue Audio RP-7 represents a significant upgrade over the excellent RP-5. Either should tempt a lot of people to go Rogue. NG, 260, 283 (RP-5 V2 version not yet reviewed)

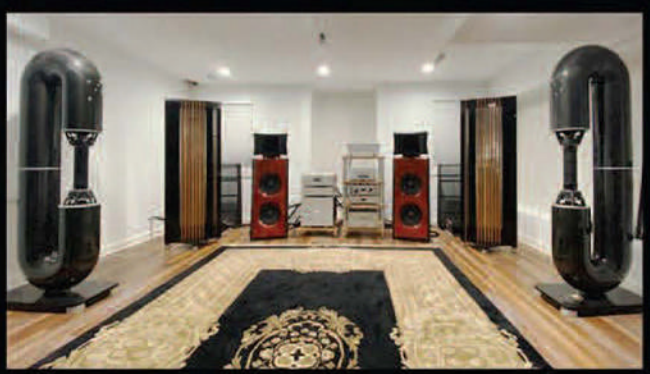
AGD Alto
$4999
All of the thrills, with none of the frills (well, almost none, there is a remote). This analog preamp has magnificent sound and is designed to interface perfectly with any of AGD's GaN-based power amps. The circuitry is fully balanced and DC

SIX U.S. LOCATIONS

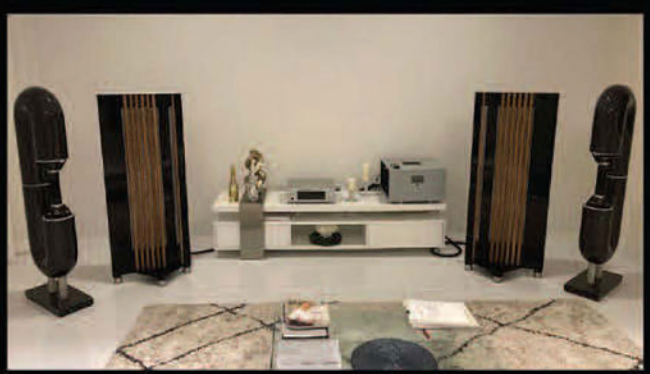
DALLAS, TX / Chris Hesse 716-982-4189

CALIFORNIA / David Hyman 917-837-2559

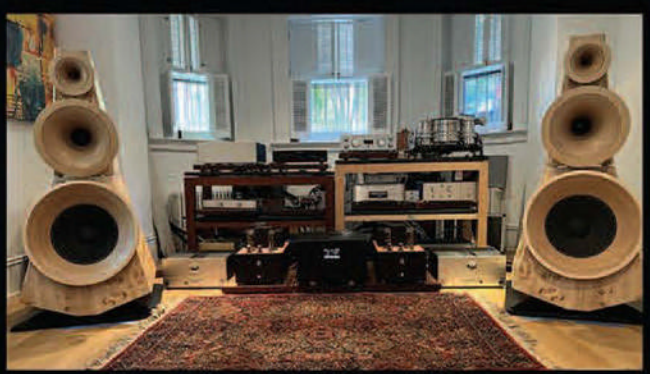
PORTLAND, OR / Bob Vineyard 503-867-6755



CHICAGO, IL / Jerry Barker 312-956-2938



WEST PALM BEACH, FL / Jakub Paszynin 610-633-8166



BROOKLYN, NY / Bob Visintainer 917-363-7423

ALSYVOX • AURENDER • DIESIS • BAYZ • MAGICO M9 DALLAS • ODEON • RAIDHO
PILIUM • KONDO • TAIKO • ESOTERIC • CONSTELLATION
VYDA • NORDOST • DEVIALET • VAC (Brooklyn/Chicago) • VYGER • TELLURIUM

coupled, with one set of XLR inputs and outputs. There are two other pairs of RCA line inputs, RCA mm or mc phono, and two RCA outputs. Quite petite in the Italian style (though it is made in the USA), it has a vintage understated look. As a purist design (even volume is handled by a passive ladder control), it has very little sound of its own, allowing the beauty, the quickness, the passion, and all the details of a multitude of musical styles to pass through *brillantemente*. MK, 338

$5000–$10,000

PrimaLuna EVO 400
$5295

The EVO 400 is not only PrimaLuna's best line preamp offering ever, but it also holds its own against ultra-high-end competition. It's hard to escape the impression that it was designed from the ground up on a power amplifier chassis. It features massive and sophisticated power supplies, high-voltage regulation, exotic passive parts, and tube rectification via a pair of 5AR4s. Miraculously, it manages to combine the virtues of modern tube sound with the tonal heft and timbral realism afforded by vintage tube preamps. If purity of expression and tonal realism are sonic priorities, get ready to embrace the EVO 400. DO, 305

Audible Illusions L3B
$5495

A purist design based on a single Russian 6H23n-EB triode per channel, the L3A distills the best attributes of modern tube sound: precise transients, a detailed presentation, and natural yet non-euphonic textures. It is its insistence on the sonic truth that defines it as a true reference line preamp. The L3A's ability to retrieve the music's rhythmic drive and drama makes it one of the most sonically persuasive line preamps on the market. Audible Illusions' best effort to date and one of the best line preamps DO has auditioned over the years at any price: audible illusions on a grand scale! DO, 259

Atma-Sphere MP-3
$5590 ($6500 with LOMC phono)

This no-frills tubed preamp from Atma-Sphere is a must-hear for the purist music lover. Offering a crystal-clear, smooth, and concise window on the music, the MP-3's expansiveness is a perfect match for both tube and solid-state amplification. Balanced-only operation, phono optional. SK, 184

Aesthetix Calypso/Calypso Signature
$6000/$8500

The all-tube Calypso delivers most of the performance of Aesthetix' two-box $13,000 Callisto linestage for about a third the price. Sonically, the Calypso is characterized by extremely good dynamics and dynamic nuance. Although the treble is smooth and somewhat laid-back, transparency and resolution are first-rate. Noise floor is highly dependent on tube quality, which has been variable. Competes with the megabuck preamps. The Signature version improves on the Calypso's already terrific performance with an expanded soundstage, richer portfolio of instrumental textures, more air, longer decays, and better-defined bass. AT found that the Signature version imparted a warmer cast to timbres. RH, 151; AT, 196

Pass Labs XP-12
$6100

The XP-12 line-level preamp forgoes dual-chassis extravagance but sonically you wouldn't know it. Music abounds with stunning orchestral layering and complex three-dimensional soundspace vistas. There's a level of harmonic bloom across the spectrum, most notably in the infusion of resonance and decay cues around strings and winds. Anchored by the precision of Wayne Colburn's single-stage electronic volume control from the Xs line, the XP-12 produced an almost eerie sense of music spontaneously bursting forth in the here and now. An outright bargain. NG, 286

Chord Electronics Ultima Pre 3
$8495

The Ultima 3 replaces the company's popular CPA3000. It offers two balanced pairs of inputs, three unbalanced inputs, one balanced AV bypass input, and a pair of balanced and unbalanced outputs. This generous complement of inputs and outputs is housed in lavish and innovative casework that sets it apart from that traditional rectangular box. The Ultima 3 is a very neutral sounding component that's revealing and uncompromising—it faithfully delivers what's on the recording. The treble has excellent extension and definition, with cymbals having natural-sounding percussive strike followed by a natural decay, adding to the sense of realism. RB, 339

McIntosh C53
$8500

McIntosh's C53 preamplifier replaces a whole shelf-full of components, rolling a state-of-the-art linestage, phonostage, DAC, equalizer, and headphone amp into a single elegant, albeit large box, with no compromises in performance. With 16 inputs and three outputs, the C53's connectivity is unrivaled, its DAC supporting every popular digital format, plus an ARC HDMI input that correctly decodes and mixes down movie and TV sources for those who demand first-class AV reproduction through their two-channel setups. Its two phonostages are good enough to obviate the need for separates. In addition to all this, the C53 offers battleship construction and looks that just radiate class, taste, and style. One of PS' reference preamplifiers. PS, 315

Aesthetix Janus/Janus Signature
$9000/$13,500

The Janus combines Aesthetix' Calypso linestage with a scaled-down Rhea phonostage in a single chassis. The Signature version features upgraded parts in the identical circuit. The units share numerous qualities: speed and detail; a low noise floor; precise rhythms; dynamics that are almost reference-caliber; and a laid-back perspective. The quiet background and smooth highs add up to long hours of glorious, fatigue-free listening. AT, 196

Lamm Industries LL2.1
$9190

This all-tube linestage preamp (with tube rectification) captures 80% of the sound of price-no-object preamps for a fraction of their cost. Never in-your-face analytical, the LL2.1 frames details organically within the fabric of the music. Treble, bass, and transparency can be improved by using the right after-market tubes. DO, 198

MBL Cadenza C11
$9200

With civilized sonics, both airy and open, dynamics that are lively, and dimensionality and imaging that are exceptional, the C11 is a joy to use in concert with other Cadenza gear, where con-

trol and communication via Ethernet link is glitch-free. It is also equipped with one of the most sonically transparent analog volume controls (via a motorized potentiometer) that we've come across. NG, 228

Mark Levinson No5206
$9900

Part of the more affordable (for Mark Levinson) 5000 Series, the N°5206 sports a host of advanced circuits and features. The dual-monaural signal path is direct coupled and pure Class A in operation. The audio path features a single gain stage mated to a digitally controlled resistor-ladder volume control. The N°5206 is fitted with an integral DAC with MQA decoding and rendering and Bluetooth connectivity; the unit can handle PCM up to 384kHz/24-bit as well as DSD up to 11.2MHz. The N°5206 even includes a headphone jack with enough current drive to power any 'phones. The icing on the cake is an outstanding mm/mc phonostage featuring a hybrid gain technology with an infrasonic filter and unusually comprehensive cartridge-loading adjustment. The preamp is superb with low-level passages, with resolution limited only by the source, not the preamplifier itself. AHC, 322

Pass Labs XP-22
$9975

The XP-22 is a significant upgrade from the previous model in this slot. Based on new semiconductors and a new volume control, the two-chassis XP-22 vaults the performance into another league. The dual-mono power supplies feature double-shielded toroidal transformers for even lower noise. The output stage is more robust, with the ability to drive long cable runs. The XP-22 is so transparent that it improves upon the sound of running a source component directly into a power amplifier—not something every linestage can claim. Musically meaningful detail and resolution are excellent. If the recording possesses the information, the rendering of space can be dramatic and dynamics startling. AQ, 316

Yamaha C-5000
$9999

Yamaha put some heart and soul into its return to the audio deep end. While the NS-5000 speakers and GT-5000 turntable are likely to attract most of the 5000 Series attention, the C-5000 preamplifier deserves its own spotlight. This fully balanced, solid-state preamp incorporates a wonderful, fully discrete phonostage with a massive 80dB of potential gain. There's a feeling of a signal unimpeded. The C-5000 doesn't require a sonic counterbalance elsewhere in the system. It also happens to be one of the most rewarding components to just put your hands on and use. An interesting and unique option in high-end preamplifiers, especially if a turntable is an important part of your system. AM, 308

$10,000 and above

VTL TL-5.5 Series II Signature
$12,000

Initially introduced in 1997, VTL's latest TL-5.5 Series II Signature has been seriously improved using technologies found in the flagship TL-7.5 Reference Series III ($35,000) and TL-6.5 Signature Series II ($22,500). But those are linestage-only hybrid designs; the 5.5 is all-tube with a fine optional phonostage. It delivers an impressive sense of the musicians' presence, with seamless bottom-to-top tonal coherence, dynamic push, and resolution that create a thrilling sense of aliveness and of the music-making process. WG, 251

Constellation Inspiration 1.0
$14,500

As with Constellation's other Inspiration Series components, the Preamp 1.0 offers Constellation-grade sound quality at what is essentially breakthrough pricing for this maker of cost-no-object components. The Preamp 1.0 sports the same circuitry, chassis build-techniques, remote control, and display as the $43k Virgo III. The sound is similar as well, with the trademark Constellation combination of resolution with ease, tremendous clarity and transparency to sources, and wonderful timbre. RH, 249

Zanden Audio Systems Model 3100
$14,500

This gorgeously built, relatively demure tube linestage preamplifier is a virtual sonic clone of its companion piece—Zanden's extraordinary 8120 stereo amplifier. With its all-tube output stage, all-tube rectification, a fixed-bias current-regulated power supply, and transformer-coupled outputs, you might expect the 3100 to sound classically "tube-y." But as is the case with Zanden's power amplifier, you would be entirely wrong. JV has not heard an all-tube linestage at this price that outdoes this one in neutrality, speed, resolution, soundstaging, and grip. JV, 243

Brinkmann Audio Marconi MkII
$14,990

When contrasted with much more expensive equipment from CH Precision, Boulder and Ypsilon, the Brinkmann preamplifier doesn't quite have their magnanimity of sound, grip, and airiness. CH Precision produces a cavernous black space that seems unrivaled. Boulder has a degree of control that is unique to it. And Ypsilon lights up the soundstage. But Brinkmann comes remarkably close and has its own set of virtues. It has a dynamism and smooth continuity that are immensely beguiling. It represents formidable German engineering allied to a profound sense of musicality that will be difficult for most listeners to resist. JHb, 301

MBL N11
$17,700

With seven inputs (five RCA, two XLR) and seven outputs (four RCA, three XLR) as well as an optional phonostage, the Noble Line N11 is equipped to handle just about everything in your system. What makes this single-stage preamp stand out is its remarkable "unity gain" volume control, which lowers the amount of boost applied to incoming signals and thereby audibly lowers noise, increases transparency and resolution, and expands dynamic range. A sonically remarkable bit of engineering. JV, 287

FM Acoustics FM 155-MKIIR
$19,750

Like its companion pieces, the FM 108-MKII monoblocks and the FM 122-MKII phonostage, this compact Class A linestage preamplifier is one of FM's most affordable products. As with the amp and phonostage, it too preserves the native sound, the number, and the receptivity patterns of the mikes being used in recording sessions, along with a clear sense of the dimensions and ambient signature of the venue in which those mikes have been set up. And yet this transparency to setup and source isn't being bought at the price of an analytical presentation. On

IMPEX RECORDS™ | 1STEP™

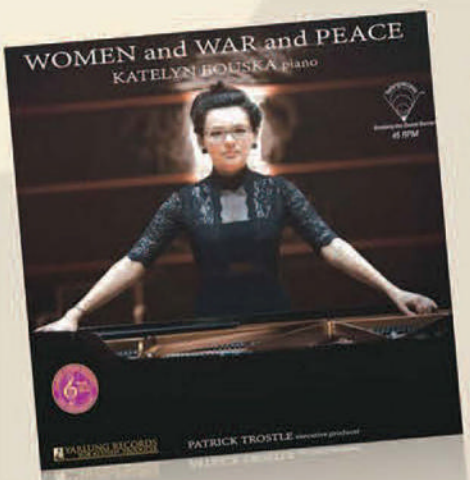
Call Today! **866-768-5760** or visit us online at **elusivedisc.com**

elusive DISC

The Incomparable IMPEX 1STEP!

1STEP #5 COMING SPRING 2024

Latest Drops From Yarlung!



Women and War and Peace took shape during concert pianist Katelyn Bouska's darkest days of isolation during the coronavirus pandemic. To use the time productively, Bouska revisited women composers at the cutting edge of music in their time.

"I am part of this wonderful band of fellow classical musicians who are seeking to reimagine the conventional roles of our instruments, and applying non-classical approaches to arrangement and composition in our works."
- Nathan Ben-Yehuda

Symmetria Pario: Creation explores the "beginnings of things," the origin of the universe as expressed in music, and various creation stories from different cultures around the world.

Fax: 765-608-5341 Info: 765-608-5340 2439 E 67th St., Anderson, IN 46013 sales@elusivedisc.com M-F: 9-6 Sat: 11-3 EST

the contrary, there is a musical sweetness to the way the FM 155 reveals instrumental and recording essentials that makes for consistently enjoyable listening. JV, 286

VAC Signature IIa
$20,000
Kevin Hayes has outdone himself with the Signature IIa preamp. Transformer-coupled, completely balanced, hand-wired with no coupling capacitors or negative feedback, the full-function model has four line inputs and a tubed phonostage with mm/mc inputs, a separate power transformer, dedicated filter circuitry, and variable impedance loading. And the sound is gorgeous. GH, 225

T+A P3100HV
$22,350
T+A's top preamplifier is a significant redesign of its predecessor. The HV in the model name denotes the high-voltage power-supply rails (100V), which T+A says leads to more linear operation of the transistors. Those transistors are hand matched JFETs mounted on a complex circuit board that compensates for temperature variation. The P3100HV has exceptional command and grip in the bass, with tremendous depth, power, and authority. It's also very fast, conveying music's dynamism. JHb, 316

VTL TL-6.5 Series II Signature
$22,500
The TL6.5 Series II Signature is a significantly updated version of VTL's TL6.5 Signature preamplifier. The VTL design team's goal for the Series II was to incorporate most of the advanced technology found in the company's flagship preamp, the TL7.5 Series III Reference—a hybrid, two-chassis (separate power supply) model—in a single chassis. The application of this advanced technology has certainly improved sonics (and ergonomics). Musically natural and measurably superior, the TL-6.5 Series II maximizes all that tubes do well, while minimizing their shortcomings. WG, 305

Boulder Amplifiers 1110
$23,000
Boulder Amplifiers' 1110 is the sweet spot in the line, offering much of the technology, sound quality, and battleship build of the company's higher-end 2100 and flagship 3000 line. More than just a source-switcher and volume control, the 1110 is a highly advanced computer-controlled, network-connected component with one of the most advanced feature sets of any preamplifier regardless of price. The 1110 has exceptional detail and transparency, a superb sense of air, "live" dynamics, tight but powerful and realistic bass, and a broad soundstage with excellent width and a depth that is just slightly forward compared to much of the competition. AHC, 287

Constellation Revelation Pictor
$24,500
As a deft amalgamation of Constellation's upper-level technology with some of the cost-saving measures from the lower-level series, the Pictor delivers overall performance closer to that of the more expensive Virgo III than expected for its asking price. With an external power supply and optional DC Filter chassis, the Pictor presents a decisive visual statement commensurate with its sound: open, transparent, dynamically alive, tonally neutral, and musically coherent. The soundstage expands beyond what is typical for a solid-state linestage and imaging is solid, three dimensional, and specific—just shy of tube-like in this regard. A wonderful linestage. KM, 294

D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Progression
$25,950 ($32,900 with DAC module)
The Progression preamplifier may not have quite the visual cachet of the company's Momentum preamplifier but it's nonetheless a stunning bit of industrial design. The power supply is isolated from the audio electronics in an ingenious arrangement that tucks the supply underneath the main chassis. Two large meters and a gorgeous volume control dominate the front panel. An optional digital module features a differential DAC compatible with PCM up to 384kHz and DSD256. The signal path is discrete and fully complementary from input to output with no negative feedback. The Progression has a midrange liveliness and resolution that bring out low-level information in strings and woodwinds without hardening the timbre of violin or brass. Low-level passages are unusually clear. The DAC module is excellent and easily worth the asking price. AHC, 300

Zanden Audio Systems 3000mk2
$28,500
The all-glass-powered Zanden Classic trio (2000mk2 linestage, 1200mk3 phonostage, and 9600mk2 monoblock power amplifier) will get you where you want to go—i.e., the sound of the real thing—without forcing you to pay a heavy toll in listenability on less-than-SuperDisc recordings. This consistent listenability is one of the Zanden Classic suite's sonic virtues. It is not a typical overlay of tubey-ness; indeed, for tube gear the Zanden 3000mk2 sounds remarkably precise. It is focused, grain-free, and *a little* Class A "dark" in timbre, without any bottom-end plumminess. Indeed, the bass of the Zanden 3000mk2 (particularly in combination with its sister phono- stage and brother power amp) is truly superb—richly (and accurately) colored, three-dimensional, bloomy, clear-as-solid-state in pitch, near transistor-quick and powerful on transients, and immensely detailed in performance cues. A TAS Product of the Year winner. JV, 293

Absolare Passion
$31,000 ($40,000, Signature Edition)
This ultra-minimalist single-ended triode preamplifier is about as tweaky as a preamplifier gets, with an extremely simple signal path, just four unbalanced inputs, no remote control, and two unmarked front-panel knobs (volume and input selection). The circuit is built using cost-no-object parts and techniques and housed in a massive aluminum chassis clad in rich leather. Sonically the Passion is very much like the companion Passion 845 power amplifiers, with a complete lack of grain, etch, and solid-state glare overlying timbres. The treble is just a little on the forgiving side, a quality that complements the tendency toward brightness of some dome tweeters. Soundstaging is phenomenal—wide, deep, transparent, and three-dimensional. RH, 234

Lamm Industries L2.1 Reference
$31,990
The L2.1 Reference is a hybrid design but not in the usual sense. The power

supply is all tube while the audio circuit is solid-state. MOSFETs are used in Class A, no-feedback circuitry for the gain and buffer stages. Sonically, the L2.1 is clearly deserving of the "Reference" appellation, holding up as it does a mirror to the music. It cuts through previous limitations of solid-state preamplification allowing the music to flow with precision and emotional conviction. DO, 278

MBL 6010 D
$32,400
This superb solid-state preamp has a noise floor so incredibly low that it consistently resolves fine harmonic and dynamic details that simply aren't audible through other great preamps. At the same time its transient speed and authority are highly realistic. To ice the cake, it is neutral in tonal balance, with excellent imaging and soundstaging, and superior ambience retrieval. One of JV's longstanding references. JV, 164

CH Precision L1
$34,500-$92,000 (depending on single, twin, three or four-box configuration)
Optional X1 power supply
$17,000
Like its companion piece, the CH Precision M1 monoblock amplifiers, this exceptional, dual-monaural, ultra-low-noise, ultra-high-bandwidth, fully balanced line-level preamplifier is a contender for Best in Solid-State. Designed by the Swiss team of Florian Cossy and Thierry Heeb, the L1 is a model of timbral neutrality, high transient speed, high detail, precision (though not razor-cut) imaging, and wall-to-wall soundstaging. The L1 may not have the bass of the Soulution 725 (and it does not come with a dandy built-in phonostage like the Soulution unit does), but it is certainly its equal in other regards—and its superior in low-level resolution. JV, 259

VTL TL-7.5 Series III Reference
$35,000
VTL's linestage is the best one it has produced. Its transient fidelity, dynamic power, enormous soundstage, and sheer grip are mesmerizing. Like its predecessors, the 7.5 features an ingenious "clean" and "dirty" box to prevent the signal from becoming contaminated by noisy parts. But there the similarities end. The Series III version of the 7.5, which features a host of upgraded parts and improved circuit design, has conquered the slight bit of electronic grain that the Series II version displayed. JH, 222

Pass Labs Xs
$38,000
An all-out challenge to the state of the art and every other preamp available. Wayne Colburn and Nelson Pass have truly excelled in producing this massive two-unit preamp. It does everything right in every aspect of sound quality and is so revealing of musical detail that you must listen closely to realize how good it is. AHC could not find any flaw by comparison with other top preamps, and its extraordinarily low noise floor and natural, detailed deep bass have few, if any, rivals. AHC, 243

Tidal Prisma
$41,000
The solid-state Prisma preamplifier is a minimalist design taken to an extreme of execution. The innovative circuits are realized with no-compromise build-quality, particularly the elaborate, discrete-resistor stepped-attenuator. The minimalist theme extends to its black polished-acrylic front panel, which includes just a volume control and a source selector—no balance control, no on/off switch (it's part of the source selector), and no display. Inputs and outputs are balanced only, including the phono input. As great as the Prisma is as a linestage, its phono section (moving coil only, with only two gain settings) is spectacular. The Prisma's unique topology reduces by nearly half the circuitry of a conventional phonostage/linestage; the result is clarity and transparency coupled with a lush timbral rendering devoid of electronic artifacts. RH, 306

Constellation Virgo III
$43,000
Save for the Technical Brain TBC-Zero, JV has never heard a faster, more detailed preamp than this high-tech gem (which uses the same circuit as the $99k Altair II, albeit with slightly less pricey component parts). But where most solid-state preamps tend to trade off tone color for resolution and speed (or vice versa), this one doesn't. Given the right source and the right speaker, the Virgo sounds ravishingly beautiful and astonishingly realistic. JV, 223

D'Agostino Master Audio Systems Momentum HD
$44,950
This drop-dead gorgeous, all-discrete, Class A, solid-state linestage preamp from master engineer Dan D'Agostino is far too neutral and accurate to compensate for the colorations in other pieces of gear. It does not have a characteristic sound that shapes the music. Instead, it seems to free music from such distortions, getting the best of detail, dynamics, soundstage, and imaging. In the end, reviewer AHC had trouble describing this marvelous preamp, for any "sound" of its own simply wasn't there. A state-of-the-art effort. AHC, 239

Lamm Industries LL1.1 Signature
$58,290
This four-chassis, dual-mono preamplifier is that rare breed that strikes a near-perfect balance between transient attack and instrumental body and does so from top to bottom in both frequency response and amplitude. Its ability to deliver speed plus sustain at all dynamic levels is extraordinary. The result, said reviewer PB, is near-perfect timbre and, if the rest of your system is up to it, nearly ideal imaging. PB, 208

darTZeel NHB-18NS
$61,000
The battery-powered darTZeel preamplifier aims to provide a silkily quiet background, and it does. With a variety of options, including numerous BNC outputs and inputs for connecting to front-end equipment and amplifiers, it functions as something of the proverbial Swiss Army knife. A nifty feature is the inclusion, once a common feature in the audio industry, of a phonostage whose performance is nothing to be sneezed at. This darTZeel believes in the lush life. It delicately and convincingly treads the fine line between tubes and solid-state to produce highs that possess a rare purity, seemingly devoid of any electronic artifacts. While bass reproduction may not be quite as stentorian as some of its competitors, such as Boulder or Gryphon, the darTZeel possesses an ability to reproduce microdetail that may be unsurpassed. JHb, 327

Gryphon Commander
$67,000
This Danish preamplifier more than merits its audacious

Royal Succession? The newly refined Pharaoh II...

It's good to be King!

ROGUE AUDIO

The new Pharaoh II hybrid integrated amplifier from Rogue Audio.

250 WPC • MM/MC phono pre-amp • discrete tube headphone amp • home theater bypass • Pure Rogue... only $3,995

Hand built in the USA by Rogue Audio, Inc.

Brodheadsville, PA • 570-992-9901 • www.rogueaudio.com

PUBC 2021 ...Alan Shaw's Masterpiece"

Audiophilia PRODUCT OF THE YEAR WINNER 2021

EX VAL

Harbeth XD

stereophile RECOMMENDED 2022 COMPONENT CLASS A

2023 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

"...nothing short of stunning..."

Fidelis distribution, llc

fidelisdistribution.com

sales@fidelisdistribution.com

stereophile RECOMMENDED 2023 COMPONENT

GOLDEN EAR the absolute sound 2023 AWARDS

name. With its beefy external power supply, the Commander is simply…commanding. No detail is too minute for it to reproduce with utter clarity and control. Add in prodigious grip in the bass region, image solidity, and seemingly effortless dynamic swells, and the Commander pretty much sails through the most demanding passages with ease. Nothing seems to faze it. An enticing mix of beauty and the beast, the Commander could hardly be a more winning preamplifier. JHb, 334

Boulder Amplifiers 2110
$70,000
Boulder's 2110 preamplifier is a technological *tour de force*. It consists of four modules, two for the power supply and two for the linestage, that help to ensure amazing image stability, subterranean bass, and gossamer-like highs. Timbres have tremendous weight and heft, coupled with a delicious pellucidity that sets it apart from other preamps. Its fully balanced operation banishes any hint of hum. Nothing extraneous ever seems to intrude upon musical reproduction, as the 2110 effortlessly delivers transient attacks with unerring accuracy. AHC, 249

Soulution 727
$74,975 (optional mm/mc phono card $11,975)
This amazingly improved ("amazingly" because its predecessor, the 725, was so good) third-generation linestage preamplifier from the ultra-high-end Swiss company Soulution was completely redesigned over a 10-year development period, coming to market in 2023 with a new input stage, an improved volume control, a new power supply, and a new output stage that boasts a bandwidth of 20MHz! The key design goal of all these changes was to reduce noise and phase shift (which are now claimed to be unmeasurably low). Sonically, the aim was (in the words of chief designer and CEO Cyrill Hammer) "higher resolution and more likelike musicality." Of course, almost everyone in the audio biz makes such claims about his newest component; moreover, it has been JV's experience that record-low distortion and super-high resolution do not necessarily (or often) translate into "higher musicality." Here, for once, they do. The Soulution 727 is the most "complete" and lifelike-sounding preamplifier that JV has heard (and he's heard them all)—a model of gorgeous tone color, tremendous bass, sledgehammer dynamic weight, three-dimensional imaging, sensational soundstaging, and, yes, detail that sets a new standard of resolution without sounding the least bit analytical. A landmark achievement from a company that has long set the bar for technical innovation and highest fidelity. JV's new reference. JV, 345

CH Precision L10
$76,000 stereo /$132,000 dual mono, dual supply linestage. Anthracite or Satin Gold finish $2,000/chassis
The L10 linestage is available as a two-chassis or four-chassis configuration. The entire system can be set up and controlled via CH's outstanding app. The 10 Series offers extraordinary sonic performance and a level of musical engagement that must be experienced to be believed. Although the sound has a pristine clarity and crystalline transparency, it never sounds even remotely analytical. Listening to music through the L10 is a revelatory experience. RH, 323

VAC Statement Line
$80,000
This pricey, exquisitely made, gorgeous-sounding, two-box, all-tube linestage preamplifier shares, quite naturally, the dark, rich, powerful sound of its companion amplifiers (the 450 iQ monoblocks). In this it is typically tube-like. And yet the VAC preamp (and amp) does not sound like other high-quality tube components in certain key ways: They are not as bloomy, for instance, as vintage ARC; they are not as lush as classic C-J; they are not as electrifying as Ken Stevens' CATs. They are a different taste entirely, sharing some qualities—speed, grip, resolution—with the best solid-state, and some qualities—liquidity, density of tone color and texture, life-sized imaging—with tubes. What they have—what all of VAC's Statement products seem to have—is the dynamic ease of the real thing, and this almost-tape-like continuousness goes a long way toward making instruments and vocalists sound real. JV, 263

Constellation Altair II
$99,000 ($16,000 for optional DC filter)
As colorless a piece of electronics as you're ever likely to hear, with no sonic flavor of its own, the Altair II allows the finest micro-details of timbre, transient information, and spatial cues to pass through without imposing its own signature on the music. Most preamplifiers shave off some low-level detail, add a bit of grain to instrumental textures, and drape a fine scrim between you and the music. Not the Altair II; what you put in is what comes out. The sheer amount of detail the Altair II resolves, the transparency to sources and speed, clarity, and dynamics are breathtaking. Moreover, the resolution comes without a trace of etch. The Altair II and the matching Hercules II amplifiers are world class, reference-quality electronics that would be at home in the most demanding systems. RH, 260

Boulder Amplifiers 3010
$142,000
With its wealth of controls, the two-box, solid-state 3010 preamplifier looks like it belongs in a NORAD control center. Boulder does nothing by half-measures: A new dual-phase 993SD gain stage and separate power supplies for each channel ensure that it is both dead quiet and can supply crushing fortissimos with ease. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the Boulder is that it comes very close to the proverbial straight-wire-with-gain that so many audiophiles lust after. Turn the volume dial up and the soundstage simply expands without the slightest sense of compression. It would be hard to think of a more linear amplifier than the Boulder. Those seeking tube-like bliss should look elsewhere. But for a refined presentation, amazing transient detail, and seemingly limitless power, this is it. JHb, 306

PREAMPLIFIERS WITH DIGITAL-TO-ANALOG CONVERTERS

Under $2000

Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 Digital
$399
The Pre Box S2 Digital offers audiophiles a very high-value DAC/digital preamp at an almost ridiculously low price. Not only does it include a plethora of important features and capabilities; it also sounds good, has an elegantly designed control surface, and is expandable. As an audiophile's needs grow, Pro-Ject micro-systems have the components to support nearly every potential input source and format available through various accessory units designed to perform

The Benchmark LA4®

2024 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

"This is my new reference standard for a linestage."

- Paul Seydor, The Absolute Sound

Designed & Built in the USA

BenchmarkMedia.com Benchmark 1-800-262-4675

specific functions. While not quite bespoke audio, the Pro-Ject Pre Box S2 is one small part of an elegant system that gives even audiophiles with limited means a way to assemble a first-class system. One of TAS' 2018 DACs of the Year. SS, 289

NAD C 658
$1999
NAD's C 658 offers many features and functions in an affordable and good-sounding package. This streaming DAC, operated via the BluOS app or remote control, has a phonostage, analog inputs, subwoofer outputs with configurable crossover, full analog and digital preamplifier functions, and Dirac Live DSP room correction. This last feature can greatly improve the sound, particularly in problematic listening rooms. The C 658's sound is excellent, with tuneful bass and a spacious soundstage. RH, 313

$2000–$5000

Gold Note DS-10 EVO
$3699 (DS-10 EVO Line, $3999; PSU-10 EVO $1399)
The Gold Note DS-10 / PSU-10 EVO combination can produce reference-level sonics. It has Ethernet, WiFi, a true all-analog signal chain, and 192 different filter settings. If you bypass all the flavorings, the DS-10 sound is neutral, which is a good place to start. When you factor in the dedicated remote and headphone capabilities as well as Roon and MQA compatibility, you have a component that does everything that a current-generation DAC/Preamplifier needs to do, and it does it well. SS, 319

Anthem STR
$4300
The STR preamplifier delivers on two high-end electronics parameters at which Anthem has always excelled, the user interface and DSP room correction. Navigation of the STR's layers of operational menus, displayed on a readable-from-across-the room, thin-film-resistor display, is intuitive and readily mastered. The latest (Genesis) version of ARC gives the user an almost limitless capacity to address quirks of real-life listening environments, the software employing two dozen IIR filters per channel and operating at 192kHz. A premium AKM DAC chip performs both 32-bit/384kHz PCM as well as 2.8 and 5.6MHz DSD processing. There's a phonostage with four selectable equalization curves other than the standard RIAA, and the preamp has an analog bypass option. AQ, 298

HiFi Rose RS150B
$4995
The Rose RS150B could be the "Swiss Army knife" of streaming DACs, with integral streaming support, MQA decoding, Roon Ready certification, a pair of analog input jacks with variable output level, and compatibility with DSD all the way up to DSD512. The build-quality is extraordinary with a chassis machined from a solid aluminum block. But the Rose's most important quality is the sound it achieves from the latest ESS Sabre ES-9038PRO. Never before has RB experienced this level of sonic quality from a streaming source. RB, 322

$5000–$10,000

Cambridge Edge NQ
$5000
For its 50th anniversary, Cambridge Audio didn't go the conservative route with the Edge NQ network preamplifier. An analog preamplifier with built-in network player and DAC, the NQ is the place to connect all the connected aspects of your musical life. The triumph here is in the simplicity and reliability of the hardware and software integration. Switching among YouTube-sourced music videos on the iPad, Chromecasted Qobuz streamed music, or computer playback of music files from a NAS is embarrassingly easy and immediate to execute. When he reviewed it together with the Edge W power amplifier, AM found the best pure audio performance to be had through the NQ's analog preamplifier or DAC inputs. The sonic result (given all the complexity inside the beautiful box) is unexpectedly hear-through, making exploration of the ever-expanding world of musical possibilities… better. AM, 301

Bryston BR-20
$6795 (with HDMI option $7595.00)
The Bryston BR-20 is one of the most successful mergers of a solid-state analog preamp with a DAC and built-in streaming available today. A model of preamp ergonomics, operationally it proved to be glitch free. An honest broker in terms of tonal accuracy, it hued to the straight and narrow, and reflected a "just the facts ma'am" fidelity. BR-20 was also superbly quiet, with bass response that had a combination of grip and authority that are the hallmarks of the best preamps of this type. Since the BR-20 unwaveringly reproduces what's on the recording, those who prefer a little added sweet frosting will find the Bryston stubbornly neutral. A superb headphone output comes standard. Tempting options include an HDMI board and a phonostage. The BR-20 operates effectively via its web user interface, but a handy aluminum remote control is also included. NG, 323

T+A DAC 200
$7125
The DAC 200 is the heart of T+A's innovative Series 200 mini-stack. Like its sister components, the MP 200 player and A 200 power amp, the DAC is a fully discreet design. There are even separate signal paths for PCM and DSD. And, unlike most DAC-Pre's, the 200 has a true stepped-ladder analog volume control. Outside, the unit is retro-attractive; cue the dual multifunction meters. Cue, too, the stunningly fast, open, and dynamic sound, which is a dead ringer for that of some far more expensive Swiss gear. Like the entire Series 200, the DAC 200 is a great deal and spellbinding to listen to. AT, 335

Boulder Amplifiers 812
$9250
The Boulder 812 includes the combined functions of an Ethernet and Wi-Fi-aware network DAC with a preamplifier and a headphone amplifier. In addition to digital inputs, the 812 also has provisions for two balanced analog inputs. Outputs include only one pair of balanced outputs. Judged solely on its sonic merits the Boulder 812 delivers everything you could want from a high-performance audio component. Its limiting factors are ergonomic. For some potential owners, the lack of a display that renders the volume in dBs may be an issue. For others, the dearth of analog outputs could be a problem. But if you are looking for a superb-sounding platform for a small room, desktop, or nearfield system, the Boulder 812 could be a perfect fit. SS, 345

Classé Delta PRE
$9999
Classé's newest stereo preamplifier features a sophisticated yet intuitive touchscreen GUI

The Sound Organisation

1009 OAKMEAD DRIVE, ARLINGTON, TX 76011
972-234-0182 | SUPPORT@SOUNDORG.COM
SOUNDORG.COM | SOUNDORG.CA

that facilitates navigation of the component's vast functional capabilities. The Delta PRE has its own excellent DAC (an AKM 4497 chipset that supports native DSD) and a phonostage that allows for the choice of cartridge type and impedance loading in seconds. The analog-domain stepped attenuator has 400 steps: You can be confident of finding the right volume setting. The preamp doesn't have automated DSP room correction, but instead offers advanced parametric EQ capabilities. Even without such wizardry, however, Classé's Delta PRE is as transparent and uncolored as the best. AQ, 312

Over $10,000

Bel Canto Black EX DAC/ Controller

$13,500

This highly sophisticated preamplifier and DAC makes it easy to access streaming services such as Tidal. In addition to being Roon-ready, the Black EX offers full MQA decoding. There's even a phonostage and headphone amplifier. The Black EX also has special provisions for using a subwoofer and can be controlled via an app. The Black EX is highly revealing of details in even the most complex and dynamically demanding musical passages. The extensive digital processing doesn't add a hint of hardness or edge. Even standard-resolution sources sound superb through the Black EX. AHC, 290

Theoretica Applied Physics BACCH-SP adio

$23,800–$27,800

The BACCH-SP adio is a controller/DAC with both analog and digital outputs. What distinguishes it from dozens of other products that can be described as such, and its *raison d'*être, is the "Band Associated Crosstalk Cancellation Hierarchy" filter developed by Dr. Edgar Choueiri at Princeton University. Interaural crosstalk—the tendency, in most listening environments, for sound from the right loudspeaker to get to the left ear and vice versa—has negatively impacted the realistic representation of spatial cues since the dawn of stereo. Choueiri has solved the problem, and the results with the great majority of stereo recordings are quite remarkable: the sort of envelopment associated with multichannel playback, as well as superior representation of a venue's reverberation characteristics. Most exceptional is an advance in dimensionality and image specificity throughout the soundfield. Seventy years worth of two-channel recordings have the potential to take on previously unappreciated palpability and spatial detail. AQ, 333

CH Precision C1.2

$36,000–$49,000 depending on input/output configuration (C1.2 mono $77,000–$90,000 (three-chassis, dual mono DACs) Optional X1 power supply $17,000

The C1.2 is a uniquely flexible control center that can accommodate all manner of digital inputs: SPDIF, USB, streaming, and raw DSD via the proprietary CH-Link between the C1.2 and its companion D1 CD/SACD transport. An excellent, optional analog input board is also available. All sources are treated to some of the most advanced digital technology extant, and all sound richly detailed and dynamically impactful. The C1.2's performance with data streaming from a NAS drive deserves special mention for stripping away the glaze that is all but unavoidable with USB. Best used with balanced inputs and outputs. AT, 239

T+A SDV 3100 HV

$38,900

The SDV 3100 HV DAC/ preamp must be one of the most sophisticated and comprehensive digital products ever made. Able to handle virtually any of today's formats, the SDV 3100 HV boasts a host of advanced digital and analog circuits that have been refined over the company's 40-year history, including custom digital filters, advanced upsampling algorithms, dual-differential DACs, and a custom discrete DSD converter with an entirely separate signal path. Sound quality is exceptional in all formats and modes, with the PCM conversion approaching the best out there, and DSD reproduction in a class by itself. The battleship build-quality, extensive features, fabulous casework, and beautiful fit 'n' finish suggest a product of twice the price. RH, 300

Tidal Audio Contros

$61,000

Tidal Audio's Contros is a no-compromise digital controller and streamer that goes to some pretty remarkable lengths to remain sonically invisible. The Contros' volume control is highly sophisticated hermetically sealed switched-resistor network that has the feel and operation of a continuous analog volume control. The DAC is a discrete 32-bit device that eschews traditional oversampling, instead implementing Tidal's own variety of data interpolation called ASRT^2 (Analog Signal Remediation Technology) to smooth out a lower-sampling-rate waveform. The result is an exceptional transparency to the source that assures that every bit of tonal, dynamic, and spatial detail present in a recording gets through to the power amplifier(s) without editorialization. It's about as close to the proverbial "straight wire with gain" as you can get. AQ, 345

PHONOSTAGES

Under $2000

Schiit Audio Mani

$149–$159

The Mani is one of the most cost-effective phono preamps on the market. It has four gain settings and two loading options via DIP switches on the bottom and works equally well with both moving-magnet and moving-coil cartridges. The Mani delivers wonderful soundstage depth while keeping the noise floor to a minimum. It handles even complex music with grace and toe-tapping fun. DK, 286

SOTA Pyxi

$300

The SOTA Pyxi is an mm/ mc phonostage with lots of flexibility. It comes in a compact case that will easily fit in any cabinet. The sound is beautifully neutral, almost to the point of vanishing from a given system. Between the large number of loading options and its incredible price point, the Pyxi does so much more than its diminutive size might suggest. This is the phonostage for anyone on the hunt for great sound that will work with a wide range of cartridges and won't destroy a budget. DK, 346

MoFi Electronics StudioPhono

$349

Renowned recording and remastering experts Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs have taken the plunge into manufacturing analog hardware: two turntables and two companion phonostages, including the $349 StudioPhono. Tim de Paravicini lent a hand with designing the internal circuit-

scott walker audio

Anaheim • Dallas / Ft. Worth

JMF Audio

hi-fi+ WINNER 2023
PREAMPLIFIER AND POWER AMPLIFIER COST NO OBJECT

JMF Audio Premier Dealer

1. DMT 3.7 Transport & Streamer-- *Digital audio with precision analog perspective*
2. HQS 9001 Mono Amplifier -- JMF's *remarkable reference power amplifier*
3. HQS 6002 Stereo Amplifier -- *Reference dual mono power amplifier*
4. PRS 1.5 Stereo Preamplifier-- *Performance beyond expectations*

SOUTHWEST AUDIO FEST

Join us at SWAF - Mar 15th - 17th 2024 - Dallas, TX

Anaheim, CA

1215 N Tustin Ave
Anaheim, CA 92807

(714) 630-4100

Keller, TX

1101 Keller Pkwy
Keller, TX 76248

(817) 320-3145

ry. Features include adjustable gain and loading for mm and mc cartridges, a mono setting, and a subsonic filter. Clean and compact, it complements 'tables sonically and visually. JM, 284

Audio by Van Alstine Vision Q+
$569
This little marvel's compact size and low cost are made possible using operational amplifiers. Frank van Alstine's vision was to select the best-sounding modern ICs and he eventually settled on the highly regarded Burr-Brown OPA627 op-amps. The circuit features a flexible mc-cartridge loading scheme. Expect plenty of low-level detail, a strong bass range, and superior dynamic contrasts. Transient speed and control can only be described as excellent. Tonal colors are somewhat muted through the upper midrange, suggesting that the Vision Q should ideally be matched with a romantic-sounding tube preamp. DO, 260 (new "+" version not yet reviewed)

Vincent PHO-500
$699
For anyone trying to assemble a high-performance phono system on a reasonable budget (under $5k), the PHO-500 could be the ideal choice, since it delivers a high-quality, low-noise signal that can easily be mated with a wide variety of high-performance front ends. You also get the added benefit of a device that allows you to record your most treasured LPs at 96/24 resolution. With its external outboard power supply, the Vincent PHO-500 ranks as the quietest phono preamplifier SS has reviewed, regardless of price. SS, 313

iFi iPhono 3 Black Label
$999
The iFi iPhono 3 is a long, relatively thin, compact rectangle, with small dipswitches on the bottom. The input connections are at one end, and the outputs are at the other. It's as unassuming as a phonostage can be, but that simplicity hides a surprising flexibility. The iPhono features loading options from 22 ohms on up to 47k ohms, with six stops between, and either 36, 48, 60, or 72dB of gain. Its low end is hefty, mids are smooth, and upper registers really sparkle. The dynamics are extra tight and shimmery, likely due to the iPhono's very low background noise. Highly recommended. DK, 317

Musical Surroundings Nova III
$1500
This latest generation of the Nova retains the virtues of the earlier iterations while improving the sonics. Those virtues include an unusually wide variety of loading options for moving-coil pickups and capacitance for moving magnets, great neutrality, and low noise. The latest model has greater dynamic punch, kick, and drive, as well as slightly more "extroverted" personality. After using battery power in the previous version, designer Michael Yee has returned to a conventional AC power supply, this a wall-wart. An optional Linear Power Supply ($650) improves performance. PS, 322

Hegel V10
$1650
Norwegian-based Hegel's first phonostage is a winner. The sound is remarkably detailed, open, and full-bodied. Plenty of mm and mc cartridge loading and gain settings are offered. The V10 is highly musical and "audiophile competent," to a degree that makes it an obvious audition choice for anyone seeking a phonostage close to the $1500–$2000 range—and possibility higher. KM, 320

Chord Huei
$1775
The Chord Huei is a compact black rectangle, with four glowing lights bumped up along the front that control loading options. The Huei includes gain steps from 49dB up to 70dB with six total stops in between for the mc section, and 21dB to 42dB with six stops for the mm section. Loading allows for 100 ohms up to 3700 ohms for mc, and 47k ohms for mm. Sonically, the low end is solid and the mids very smooth; the overall presentation is on the warm end of the spectrum. DK, 317

Gold Note PH-10
$1999 (PSU-10, $1199)
The solid-state PH-10 (and matching optional PSU-10 power supply) is a half-width component, which makes for easy and flexible placement in or on top of a cabinet or rack. Fit and finish are excellent. All functions (EQ curves, impedance loading, gain) can be adjusted and confirmed via a front-panel TFT display on-the-fly, while playing music. Its overall presentation is transparent and neutral (with a slightly warm tone and a weighty midrange). Some phonostages pursue "absolute technical objectivity" as their goal. The PH-10 is all about the music. If you're a "truth-seeker," there are other products to choose from, but if you're a "pleasure-seeker," then the PH-10 is for you. SS, 305

$2000–$3000

Ortofon ST-80 SE Transformer
$2199
Dual-mono, magnetically shielded, solid, substantial, beautifully made, and aesthetically striking, the ST-80 SE is the best moving-coil step-up transformer TAS reviewer Paul Seydor has ever used. Sonically neutral yet with plenty of flesh and blood life and vitality, it boasts a combination of musicality, organicism, smoothness, and a certain difficult-to-define unfettered and wholly natural dynamism that no active step-up can quite match, plus the deepest, most well defined, and powerful bass response of any transformer in his experience (at least with all the MCs he's tried). Yielding virtually nothing in the way of detail to active alternatives, it's also just about the coolest looking step-up device around. PS 346

Sutherland Engineering 20/20 Mk2
$2200 (linear power supply option, $450)
The 20/20 shares designer Ron Sutherland's "twin mono" (identical circuit) approach to electronics design, but unlike other recent Sutherland models, the 20/20 is not powered by rows of D-cell batteries. Instead, it uses an unusual (for high-end audio) pair of "regulated desktop power supplies." The sound is classic Sutherland: very low-noise, beautiful throughout the midrange, with a big, transparent stage, excellent detail and focus, and a bit of politeness in the deep bass. Some won't like the tradeoffs; musical purists will embrace them. WG, 215

Moon 310LP
$2300
The stand-alone 310LP phonostage offers the analog hound both versatility and excellent performance in an elegant package. WG, 225

ORION

For 30 Years, Rockport Technologies has manufactured industry leading, dual-shell, composite loudspeaker enclosures with the lowest noise floor and most optimized form for driver placement and diffraction control. The ORION®'s DAMSTIF2® enclosure continues this tradition by merging a cast aluminum inner structure with an aerospace carbon fiber outer shell, consolidated via a high mass damping core. Like our flagship LYRA loudspeaker, the ORION's enclosure is unique in that it has no conventional joinery, no fasteners, and simultaneously achieves the multiple goals of maximum damping, stiffness, and mass. The fundamental absence of any enclosure induced noise has a profound effect on the ORION's presentation, yielding an incredibly low noise floor, unmatched dynamic contrasts, and astonishing low level information retrieval. For the full story, use this QR code to watch the ORION video.

Rockport Technologies

586 Spruce Head Road, South Thomaston, ME 04858 • USA • phone 207 596-7151 • rockporttechnologies.com •

Parasound Halo JC 3+
$2499
Thoroughly upgraded, the JC 3+ not only adds loading adjustments to the (now-discontinued) JC 3 but improvements to signal-to-noise, tweaks to the mm/mc gain stages, a beefier power supply, and a larger power transformer. With every rotation from an LP collection the JC 3+ conveys a heady mix of profound silence and kick-butt energy, a kiss of romance through the mids, and an ability to extract low-level information and define it in acoustic space. NG, 245

$3000–$6000

EAT E-Glo S
$3599 ($4999 with EAT LPS Linear Power Supply)
European Audio Team (E.A.T.) has taken the ECC83 dual triode tube and married it with solid-state electronics to create the E-Glo S phonostage. The input section is a hybrid that uses JFETs and ECC83 tubes to provide gain. Extensive gain and loading settings make the E-Glo S compatible with a wide range of cartridges. The LPS ($1295 if bought separately, $795 with the E-Glo S) is a dual-output power supply capable of powering two devices (e.g., the E-Glo S and select E.A.T. turntables). Used in conjunction with the E-Glo S, the LPS provides a more robust power supply than the one supplied with the E-Glo S alone. Many phonostages emphasize transients and focus on extracting the last measure of detail. The EAT isn't one of them, favoring a gentler, more intimate sound. Pleasant and engaging are the words that best describe the E-Glo S. AJ, 300

PrimaLuna EVO 100
$3695
PrimaLuna's first standalone phonostage accepts both mm and low-output mc cartridges. It's an absolutely fabulous tube extravaganza. Not only are both gain stages tube based; they also add tube rectification and tube regulation via a pair of EL34 pentodes, giving you have a unique circuit solution. The EVO 100 uses active inverse RIAA EQ based on feedback loops, emulating such classics as the Marantz 7 and Audio Research SP3a. System integration is super easy via front-panel selectable mc input-impedance settings. For those of us addicted to tube sound, the EVO 100 is a godsend. It serves up a luscious midrange without losing sight of detail resolution, as well as image focus and 3D soundstaging—tube gear's traditional strengths. This superlative phonostage elevates the vinyl playback experience to new heights. It has magnified DO's enjoyment level to the point where he just can't stop spinning vinyl. Truly a sonic masterpiece. DO, 344

Pass Labs XP-17
$4500
Pass' single-chassis, dual-mono design mixes an easy, almost relaxed fluidity with an iron grip of authority. Neither explicitly solid-state nor tube in character, it dishes out savory, textured tastes of both with smooth airy treble response, and extended and controlled bass extension. Vocals have a tactile presence that continues to underscore a key strength of the LP analog world. Nor does the Pass squeeze images; rather it lets them breathe within the acoustic of the venue. Widely configurable for mm and mc, the XP-17 conveys the signal

with minimal commentary while letting the music prevail in all its detail and emotion. NG, 302

Boulder Amplifiers 508
$5250
The superb 508 mm/mc phonostage is a fully balanced, solid-state design that has all the virtues of the traditional Boulder sound. It's very quiet, allowing the phonostage to extract tiny nuances from LPs that fuller-sounding phono preamps might gloss over. The 508 is superbly linear in performance, allowing it to navigate the treble region without a hint of glare. Bass is robust but never overwhelming. The resolving power of the 508 means that can render the most delicate musical passages with finesse and ease. The 508 may be diminutive in size, but not in performance. JHb, 313

Zesto Audio Andros II
$5900
Zesto Audio's phonostage embodies all the virtues of latter-day tube design with none of the drawbacks. It has solidity, dimensionality, vitality, transparency, excellent transient response, well-defined and extended bass, a superbly rich midrange, and very low noise. A sensibly wide range of loading options is available for mc's, which are stepped up by transformers, which must be in part responsible for the deliciously smooth, unfatiguing highs. An outstanding product. PS, 222

MoFi MasterPhono
$5995
Designed by industry veteran Peter Madnick, this versatile, high-performance, made-in-the-U.S.A. phono preamplifier offers a transimpedance moving-coil input plus a voltage gain-based moving magnet/moving coil input (for a total of three). Front panel controlled, it has four gain levels and nine resistive loading choices plus additional rear-panel plug-in resistor option. The MasterPhono also includes multi-function V.U. meters and mono and subsonic filter options, all controllable using an attractive milled-aluminum remote. The power supply, built into separate "inner chassis," isolates noise-producing circuitry. Well-built, attractive looking, and neutral in sound, it deftly delivered transients, pleasing image focus, effective, stable imaging, and generous soundstaging. MF, 345

$6000 and above

VTL TP-2.5i
$6000
When compared to the big boys—costly gear from Boulder, Ypsilon, and so forth—the VTL isn't some kind of giant-slayer. But the comparison isn't fair, or to put it another way, it's only enlightening in showing that gear in the TP-2.5i's price range comes tantalizingly close to achieving the performance of far more elaborate designs with separate power supplies and the like. Anyone looking for a superbly enjoyable but moderately priced phonostage with a touch of tube bliss would do well to consider the TP-2.5i. JHb, 302

Coincident Speaker Technology Statement Phono Stage
$6499
Coincident has surpassed itself with its marvelous new tube phonostage. Powered by a 40-pound separate power supply that connects to the main unit with an umbilical cord, the Coincident packs an unbelievable wallop, particularly in the bass. The Coinci-

dent is tailor-made to drive rock or orchestral music. Its rich midrange, deep low end, and sizzling dynamic swings make a wide variety of LPs sound more lifelike, endowing the music with a real sense of drama and urgency. Vocals have a creaminess to them that is difficult to resist. Put bluntly, the Statement makes a real statement. JHb, 322

Aesthetix Rhea/Rhea Signature
$7000/$10,000
With three inputs, variable cartridge-loading—adjustable via remote control—and a front-panel display of gain and loading, the Rhea is a versatile phonostage. Although it has tons of gain, the noise level is relatively low, making it compatible with a wide variety of cartridges. The Rhea exhibits transient quickness, effortlessness on crescendos, and a deep, layered soundstage. The Signature version vividly demonstrates the value of component quality. Although the circuit is identical to that of the Rhea, the Signature uses ultra-premium parts. The result is a much better bottom end, even smoother timbres, and (surprisingly) greater dimensionality. Rhea owners can upgrade to the Signature for the difference in retail price. The Signature upgrade is expensive, but well worth it. RH, 151/196

Zesto Andros Deluxe II
$8300
This phonostage is unmistakably Zesto from the defining wave in its industrial design. The two-stage tube gain system is the quietest RB has experienced, while at the same time excelling at dynamics and detail. The Zesto remains true to the music, delivering instrumental textures and remaining tonally neutral, without blooming in the midrange as many tube-based phonostages do. The Zesto is never fatiguing and will provide hours of listening enjoyment for all types of music. RB, 328

Esoteric E-02
$9500
Esoteric's flagship phonostage may seem expensive, but it's a bargain compared with much pricier phonostages. That's because the E-02 competes with the best regardless of cost, and in many ways delivers reference-class performance. Fully balanced with a whopping 72dB of gain, the E-02 ticks off all the audiophile boxes. But what makes it such a standout is the way it disappears, imparting virtually no sonic signature of its own to the music. The E-02 simply sounds like the recording and the rest of your system. The execution and build-quality are exemplary. AM, 294

Zanden Audio Systems 120S
$10,500
This entirely redesigned, entirely solid-state phonostage (with outboard power supply) from the great Japanese audio engineer Kazutoshi Yamada is the entry-level companion-piece to his Model 8120 power amp and 3100 linestage preamp. Like the amp and preamp, the Model 120S is simply superb sounding, designed with an almost magical ear to what makes music sound sweet and lifelike. When you throw in very high resolution of inner detail, great bass, and the incredible soundstaging and imaging for which Yamada's Zanden gear has always been famous, you get a demure little phonostage that is hard to beat at its price. Model 120 reviewed, JV, 259

Pass Labs XP-27
$12,075
The XP-27 is a dual-chassis design employing double-shielded toroids, two of them, in the power supply. To lower the noise floor, switching and loading in the XP-27 is accomplished at a relatively high signal level, which is good news for fans of ultra-low-output mc cartridges. The XP-27 is also notable for its ease of use. Front-panel knobs have multiple settings for resistive load and reactive load (i.e., capacitance); plus, there are three gain settings, appropriate for pretty much any cartridge. RCA and XLR outputs, one set of each, are provided. A superb choice for vinyl-loving old hands, as well as those who may be coming home after a sojourn in the digital desert. AQ, 316

Moon 810LP
$13,500
The 810LP is technically impressive, particularly its heroic power-supply design and vibration-isolation measures. It's also solidly built and offers a wide array of gain and loading options that makes optimizing its performance for any cartridge a snap. World class by any measure, the 810LP combines a dead-quiet background, a pristine clarity of timbre, outstanding dynamics, and an expansive and well-defined soundstage. Even under the microscope of reference-class loudspeakers, this Simaudio impresses not just with its audiophile attributes, but more importantly with how musically compelling it makes listening to LPs. TAS' 2013 Phonostage of the Year. RH, 231

Lamm Industries LP2.1
$14,690
A significant upgrade of the LP2, which was Lamm's entry-level phonostage for many years. The emphasis is entirely on signal purity. An exceedingly low noise floor is a major plus, allowing the music to swell up from a velvety black background with no perceptible hash or grain. The presentation is detailed, but not overly so. The vibrancy and urgency of human voice are reproduced exceedingly well. Tonal colors are beautifully rendered but without excessive tube warmth. The tonal balance is very much on the neutral side of reality. In sum, a perfect marriage of traditional solid-state strengths with the harmonic textures of tubes. DO, 248

Brinkmann Audio Edison MK II
$14,990
Reviewer Jacob Heilbrunn listened to the Edison both through the Brinkmann Marconi and Ypsilon silver PST-100 preamp, which afforded him the opportunity to hear exactly what it was—and was not—doing. The sheer artistry that the Edison conveyed on the Philips recording The Delectable Elly Ameling was a combination of the sublime and the beautiful. On Mozart's wonderful motet *Exsultate, Jubilate*, the Edison tracked every syllable, every quaver, every trill that Ameling enunciated during her ravishing performance. There wasn't a trace of sibilance or harshness. Instead, the Brinkmann delivered a posh, upholstered sound that was quite delectable. Breathtaking, actually. JHb, 301

Triangle Art P-200
$15,000
The P-200 can comfortably accommodate both mm and mc cartridges. It distances itself from the competition by virtue of its superb spatiality, transient speed, and resolution of low-level detail. Expect a compelling dynamic range capable of fleshing out subtle microdynamic nuances as well scaling orchestral peaks with composure. The P-200 simply

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS CELEBRATES **33 YEARS** OF THE BEST ANALOG GEAR

TURNTABLES OF THE YEAR

* MASTER INNOVATION
The Absolute Sound 2020

* OVATION - The Absolute Sound 2011

* CONCEPT - Stereophile 2021

clearaudio

CLEARAUDIO
MADE IN GERMANY

* REFERENCE JUBILEE
Stereophile 2022

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS 33

EST. 1991 - OAKLAND, CA

MUSICALSURROUNDINGS.COM | 510.547.5006

gets out of the way and allows the music to ebb and flow without dynamic constraints or tube colorations. Most of you will be perfectly happy with the stock tube complement which squeezes out a fair amount of tube magic but know that it responds well to basic tube rolling should you get the urge to experiment with your favorite preamp tube types. DO, 334

VTL TP-6.5 Series II Signature
$15,000 ($18,000 with internal mc step-up option)
A thoroughly modern, versatile, dual-input phono preamplifier in a single, relatively compact chassis. Both versions include a hybrid JFET/12AU7 vacuum tube mc input capable of 62dB/68dB (single-ended/balanced out) gain. One offers a 12AX7-based mm second input, the other a Lundahl transformer-coupled second mc input. Both make use of significant circuit upgrades originated in the TL-7.5 Series III tube/JFET preamplifier. The hybrid JFET mc input deftly combines solid-state's low noise advantages with the vacuum tube's rich sonics to produce enticing, timbrally neutral sound. VTL's micro-processor-controlled operating system makes possible convenient, full functionality front-panel switching. MF, 335

FM Acoustics FM 122-MKII
$17,750
A tiny Class A phonostage (and linearizer) with infinitely adjustable curves to properly EQ mono recordings made before the RIAA era (one of FM's most famous innovations), the FM 122-MKII tells you the truth about LPs without robbing them of their inherent musicality. This is a very transparent component that gives you a keen insight into how instrumentalists are being recorded, without adding any sense of the analytic or much color of its own. Regardless of the virtues of newer-gen Swiss gear (and there are many), this remains a formula for successful playback, and FM Acoustics remains a marque you ought to audition before making an ultra-high-end purchase. JV, 286

Zesto Audio Andros Téssera Reference
$19,900
The two-box (main unit and power supply) Téssera Reference accepts four inputs, two moving-magnet and two moving-coil (or up to four low-output moving-coils with the use of two additional external step-up devices). Sonically, it is full-bodied and composed. The sound created by this phonostage maintains dynamic development and much of a note's decay when called for. Without favoring one over the other, it reproduces all music genres fairly evenly. AJ, 287

Van den Hul Grail SE
$25,995
Audio legend A.J Van den Hul is famed for his Speed Racer-like cartridges, but he has also made a serious run at phonostages in recent years. The solid-state, fully balanced Grail SE is his effort to produce a top-drawer phono preamp. It features a current-mode input that is supposed to optimize the energy transfer of a moving-coil cartridge and ensure zero hum. If the Grail is anything to go by, the proponents of current-mode phonostages are onto something. The Grail packs a real wallop on jazz big band and orchestral recordings, a testament to its wonderfully low noise floor. It does not possess the bloom of tubed units nor reach quite as far into the back of the hall as some other current-mode phonostages. But its silky sound and dynamism are an enticing package. JHb, 302

Constellation Revelation Andromeda
$28,000
The Andromeda uses some of the same building blocks found in the Pictor linestage, including three separate power supplies in an outboard chassis. The Andromeda can accommodate up to four cartridges—two moving coils and two moving magnets (one each XLR and RCA). Moving-magnet settings allow for three capacitive and three resistive loading options. The trick, as with any phonostage, is to apply the RIAA equalization curve accurately and add enough gain to increase the low-voltage cartridge output to line-level standard, while also preserving signal integrity and keeping noise to a minimum. The Andromeda does a marvelous job at these things. Reviewer Kirk Midtskog has heard plenty of mega-buck turntable rigs, and the Andromeda made his sound much, much closer to those setups than he thought possible—fabulously clear, open, impactful playback. KM, 294

Zanden Audio Systems 1200S
$29,500
When JV heard the original version of the tube-powered Zanden 1200 phonostage with user-selectable EQ, better than a decade-and-a-half ago, he was amazed by its reproduction of acoustic space. It simply put more square yardage between and among instruments than any other audio component he'd ever reviewed, and with that incredible increase in separation came a commensurate increase in the audibility of each instrument in an ensemble—what it was playing and how it was being played. The only downside to the original Zanden 1200 was its bass range, which was a mite plummy in the way that tube gear then sounded. The latest iteration of the 1200S no longer suffers from bass bloat. Indeed, it is positively superb in the bottom octaves, reproducing pitch, timbre, intensity, and duration with the blur-free clarity of solid-state. The Zanden's neutrality extends from bottom to top, making the 1200S among the highest-resolution tube phonostages JV has heard. One of TAS's 2019 Products of the Year. JV, 293

CH Precision P1
$31,000-$89,000 (depending on single, twin, three or four-box configuration; pair of optional EQ boards [four curves] $1850; optional X1 power supply $17,000)
The P1 phonostage relies on current amplification rather than traditional voltage amplification. This means that you get a better transfer of energy, at least in theory, and a lower signal-to-noise ratio. Sonically, it's as if the P1 removes a layer of varnish from recordings to reveal what's lurking in the grooves. The presentation is quite different from a tube phonostage. The P1 has better bass grip and dynamic slam. While there's no gainsaying that it does not possess the glamour of tubes, or pass the same amount of harmonic information, it excels in neutrality, dynamic heft, and the ability to peer into the remotest recesses of an LP, revealing in detail what is taking place during the performance. Anyone looking for a state-of-the-art solid-state phonostage should give the P1 a long listen. JHb, 297

MoFi

Andrew Jones' Latest Masterpiece: Modern Design, Classic Aesthetics

NEW MoFi
SourcePoint 10
Bookshelf Speakers

NEW Bowers & Wilkins
805 D4 Bookshelf Speakers

KEF
LS50 Meta Bookshelf Speakers

Shunyata
Eiger Power Conditioner

NEW HiFi Rose
RS520 Streamer/Amplifier

Luxman
L-507Z Integrated Amplifier

musicdirect

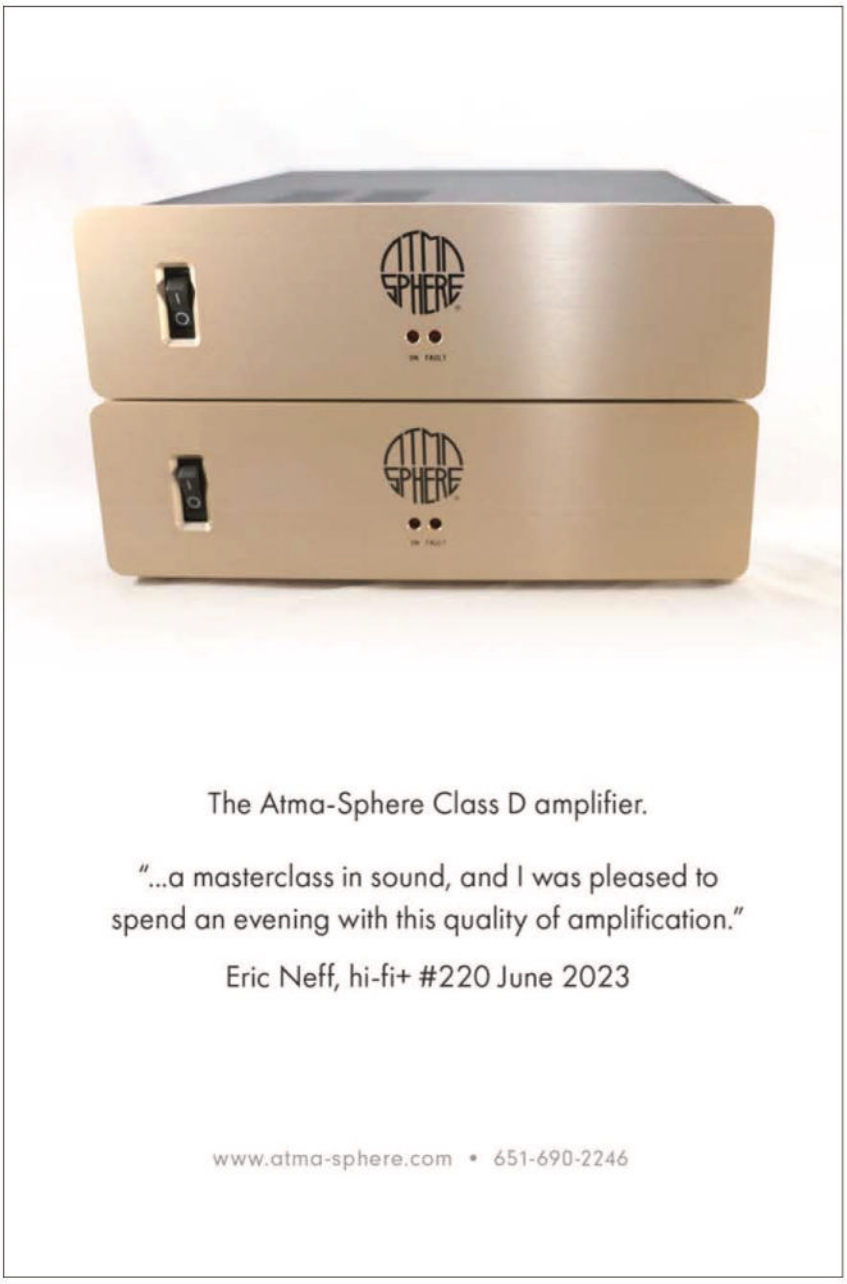
312-433-0200

CHECK OUT OUR NEW CATALOG!

Call for a free copy

Audio Research Reference Phono 10
$35,000
Like its companion piece, the Reference 10 Line Stage, this two-chassis, touch-screen-operated, entirely dual-mono (from power supplies through output circuits), tube phonostage has sensationally lifelike tone color and tonal weight, tremendous dynamic reserves, and uncannily three-dimensional imaging, making for a sonic presentation that is unmistakably "right" from midbass to top treble. The highest-fidelity phono preamp that ARC has made (which is saying a mouthful), and certainly one of the most realistic phonostages on the market. JV, 242

Goldmund PH3.8 Nextgen
$44,975
Goldmund's original PH3 phonostage was released in 1995. There followed a long dry spell wherein the company concentrated on digital playback. With the LP revival of the past decade the company has again seen the light, and the PH3.8 Nextgen is the first proof. Unlike the single-box PH3, the PH3.8 Nextgen is a two-chassis component, with a separate external power supply. The unit's slew rate of >80V/µs and rise time of <400ns, combined with its very low noise and very high bandwidth, are said to be keys to its transient speed and hard-hitting dynamics. But the PH3.8 Nextgen doesn't just deliver lifelike speed and impact; it also, and simultaneously, gives you the color, texture, and action of instruments and vocals. A genuine contender for the laurels. JV, 312



Constellation Perseus
$48,000
Designed by John Curl, the Perseus is one of the most lifelike transistor phono preamps JV has auditioned. Capable of feats of resolution undreamt of by analog hounds, the Perseus not only recovers information that many other phonostages miss; it also recovers it without spotlighting those details by completely leaching away their tone color (though the Perseus is on the coolish, analytical side). Like all of Constellation's Performance Series products, the Perseus does a standard-setting job of balancing extraordinarily high resolution and transient speed with lifelike (when the record is lifelike) timbre. JV, 223

Boulder Amplifiers 2108
$56,000
Boulder made waves with its 2008 phonostage well over a decade ago, but the 2108 shows that its efforts have not crested. Quite the contrary. The fully balanced 2108 is markedly superior to its predecessor, both in terms of a lower noise floor and a more mellifluous sound. Gone is any hint of the sterility that some detractors professed to discern in the 2008. Instead, the 2108, which has a separate power supply, is a suave performer. Its iron-fisted control is always in service of the music rather than the reverse. On LP after LP, the 2108 conveys the phenomenal transient accuracy that has become a hallmark of Boulder equipment. It stands at the apex of solid-state reproduction of vinyl records. JHb, 306

Soulution 755
$72,000
The 755 phonostage is an entirely rethought and greatly improved version of the Soulution 750. It now arrives with user-selectable loading via its AMOLED panel, improved bandwidth, distortion, and separation, and enough gain and regulation in its line-level output stage to drive and control a power amplifier directly (thus obviating the need for a separate preamp). Its performance is phenomenal, combining all the traditional Soulution virtues (color, bloom, body, slam, lightning transient speed) with extremely high-resolution of detail and superb pitch definition in the bass. The thing about Soulution is that that

In loving Memory of Jim Winey

April 18, 1934 - January 10, 2024

MAGNEPAN INCORPORATED

detail is woven into the fabric of the music (rather in the way tubes present detail), rather than riding analytically on its surface. One of Soulution's truly great products and JV's reference. JV, 276

CH Precision P10
$76,000 (pair of optional EQ boards with eight curves $2250; P10 four-box, dual-monaural, dual-supply phonostage $132,000; Anthracite or Satin Gold finish $2000/chassis)
Much to the surprise of CH Precision's engineering team, what began as an exercise in lowering the older P1 phonostage's already low noise floor, concluded with a new P10 that both measures and sounds substantially better than what was already one of the world's most accomplished non-sounding phono preamps. The 6dB improvement from -135dBu to -144dBu produced in part by moving the power supply into an outboard chassis delivered the expected sonic benefit of being able to hear further and more clearly into the soundstage, but it inexplicably also delivered improved bass extension and low-frequency macrodynamic articulation—something referred to in the real world as "better bass." Midband transparency is also notably improved, as is image three-dimensionality and solidity. MF, 344

VAC Statement
$80,000
If you've got the dough and the itch, you're going to have to go a very long way to find a superior tube unit. Capable of 76dB gain (which can be upped to 82dB at customer request), this two-chassis (separate power supply), all-glass-bottle VAC has more input headroom than any other phonostage JV has had in his system. The sonic results are audible, as the Statement Phono Stage never hits a "dynamic ceiling," the way other tube and transistor phonostages so often do. Plus, you will get the most exquisitely dark, rich timbres and beautifully resolved textures you've heard this side of an SET, without any of the fat-potato bottom-end or treble roll-off of an SET. JV, 263

DISC PLAYERS

Under $2000

Rotel CD14 CD MK II
$999
The CD14 CD player doesn't try to be anything but a CD player. It uses a highly regarded Wolfson DAC chip, which is capable of sampling rates up to 192kHz; of course, as the sampling rate of CDs is 44.1kHz, the DAC's capability is overkill. The CD14 will also play MP3 files, but you'd need to burn those onto CDs first (there's no USB input that would allow you to play them off a USB flash drive). Analog output is on unbalanced RCA jacks—there's no balanced XLR out. The CD14 sounds good, though the bass lacks a little impact. VF, 273

Arcam CDS50
$1320
Unimposing in its dimensions and bulk, the Arcam CDS50 employs a SABRE 9038 Reference chipset for D-to-A conversion—up to 32-bit/192kHz for PCM sources as well as (DoP) DSD. The disc drawer is a slow-loading plastic affair that doesn't inspire confidence, but the player delivers gutsy electric bass/kick drum sound on well-engineered rock recordings. The soundstage presented is somewhat narrower than with competing (and more expensive) products. Downloading the iOS/Android MusicLife app to a phone or tablet gets one connected to several streaming services and to internet radio. AQ, 300

Yamaha CD-S1000
$1799
Available for a decade and with its list price recently reduced by $500, the CD-S1000 is something of a "senior citizen" among digital source components. There are no streaming or networking capabilities, but if all you need is silver-disc playback, this 33-pound, built-like-a-tank machine does the job very well. The player uses a pair of Burr-Brown PCM 1796 DACs to handle sample rates up to 192kHz and plays SACDs in their "native" DSD format. The disc drawer has a gearless mechanism in a steel/wood chassis and offers exceptionally smooth, quiet operation. There are both coaxial and optical digital outputs, so the CD-S1000 is an excellent candidate to serve as a transport with a high-end DAC. AQ, 300

$2000–$10,000

Technics SL-G700M2
$3499
Technics SL-G700M2, the successor to the SL-G700, combines a CD/SACD player, DAC, and streamer in one capable package. All you need is an amplifier and speakers for a complete digitally based system. It offers a superior disc player and DAC with equally good streaming capability. It did not perfectly match the sound quality of a two-piece digital front end costing nearly four times as much, but the sonic differences between the SL-G700M2 and that new top-quality DAC were limited and audible only on the best recordings. They consisted of minor differences in low-level resolution and in soundstage width and depth. Overall, the SL-G700M2 delivers on its promise of extensive functionality and superb sound. AHC, 338

Marantz SA-K1 Ruby
$3999
The great audio designer Ken Ishiwata made his reputation with an exceptionally musical-sounding modification of an early Marantz CD player. The SA-KI represents his latest, possibly his last, digital component and is his finest work, offering the best SACD and CD playback from a single unit that TAS's Paul Seydor has had in-house, and some of the best he's heard anywhere. Its outstanding onboard DAC can be used with a music server to stream and play downloads in every resolution commonly available, including native DSD up to 11.2MHz. Those in search of the proverbial "last" disc-spinner need look no further. PS, 302

Bryston BCD-3
$4495
Reviewer Alan Taffel began his review by wondering if a CD player like the BCD-3 was even relevant in today's digital world. He discovered, to his surprise, that it was. His next discovery was just how good the BCD-3 sounds, and how much of an improvement it represented over even excellent last-generation CD players. Then, the Bryston went toe-to-toe with one of the best CD players available—without embarrassing itself in the least. Lastly, he discovered that the BCD-3's upgrade path, which consists of turning itself into a transport to work with future or more expensive DACs, really works. Put this together and you really do have what could be your last CD player. "If I were choosing a CD player that wouldn't break the bank but was unflinching in its musical and sonic generosity,"

The Black DAC System
Sending the purist signal with exceptional musicality to your amplifier
bel canto
ETH 44.1 69
bel canto
www.belcantodesign.com
roon TIDAL qobuz vTuner USB phono
bel canto 25 YEARS ADVANCED AUDIO DESIGN

AIR SPECTRA
POWERCORD
Designed for Source Components
8 Gauge Cryo-Alloy™ Conductors
Rhodium over Tellurium Connectors
Ultra-High Harmonic Resolution
Holographic Soundstage
Precise Dynamic Control
2024
the absolute sound
EDITORS' CHOICE
AWARDS
VooDoo CABLE
Handcrafted in the USA
www.VooDooCable.net
Also Available at The Cable Company

Alan concluded, "the BCD-3 would be at the top of my list." AT, 289

McIntosh MCT500
$5500
The MCT500 SACD transport was introduced for audiophiles who already own a McIntosh preamp, integrated amp, or receiver equipped with one of the company's proprietary DAC modules. It will handle virtually any 4.75" disc on the planet and, of course, hybrid SACDs. With no built-in DAC, the MCT500 allows direct access to the DSD files on an SACD disc via a proprietary cable that can be connected only to other McIntosh products with the reciprocal MCT jack. It's thus impossible to speak of its sound because its sound is that of the partnering McIntosh component. As auditioned by PS with the C52 and C53 preamps, its reproduction was as good as he has experienced with any other SACD/CD players or DACs, bettered by none and equaled only by a very few. PS, 315

T+A MP 200
$5900
T+A's MP 200 is best thought of as a CD transport plus a Roon-compatible streamer. There's no DAC inside, but the MP 200 does everything to tee up multiple digital sources—including HDD, SDD, and thumb drives—for a downstream DAC. When combined with T+A's DAC 200, the two act as a single unit. The MP 200 is a superb-sounding streamer, perhaps because it houses the same streaming module as T+A's top separates. Further, the in-house-built CD transport rivals the best in the world. Add in a gorgeous, petite form factor plus great value, and you've got a home run. AT, 335

Mark Levinson No5101
$6050
With a disc drive that will play CD and SACD, along with a fully equipped streaming DAC, the Mark Levinson N°5101 will handle just about any digital source. The player is compatible with PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz, as well as DSD up to 4x. On the technical side, the unit has a 32-bit ESS Sabre DAC with user-selectable digital filters and a proprietary jitter-reduction circuit. The output stage is fully discrete, direct-coupled, and dual monaural, with the signal output on RCA and XLR jacks. You can operate the unit via a traditional handheld remote control or via a custom app, called 5Kontrol. The player has excellent sound quality, particularly in the transition from the upper bass to the lower midrange, which preserves the natural warmth of music without softening it. AHC, 322

Aesthetix Romulus
$9000–$10,000
Another home run for Aesthetix, the tubed Romulus combines a disc player and DAC (USB, AES/EBU, SPDIF inputs) in a highly functional and great-sounding component. The additional $1000 from the base price buys you an innovative volume control that allows you to drive a power amplifier directly. The build- and parts-quality are first-rate. Sonically, the Romulus offers an exceptionally natural sound with a great sense of ease and an expansive soundstage. RH, 243

MBL Cadenza C31
$9600
In today's computer-driven marketplace the C31 CD player can just as reasonably be considered a DAC with transport." Either way, its performance is uncompromising. With Red Book discs the slot-drive transport gets a slight nod for its more intimate and lush perspective; however, with 24-bit/96kHz material the asynchronous USB wins hands down. A jewel of a player. NG, 228

T+A MP 2000 R MKII
$9825
Not just a glorified music computer, T+A's R-Series MP 2000 R MkII is more accurately a hybrid of CD transport and DAC with potent network/streaming-client capability. Thus, it accommodates most of today's digital sources, from discs to smart devices, USB thumb drives, outboard storage like a NAS, plus internet radio and music services such as Tidal. CD and network playback are unerringly superb, with naturalistic timbres and harmonics, midrange bloom, and ripe bass resonance and control. NG, 275

$10,000 and above

Luxman D-10X
$16,995
Whether streaming, playing downloads, or spinning 4.5" music discs, the D-10X will play virtually any audio-only two-channel or hybrid disc on the planet. With outstanding build, engineering, performance, and functional and ergonomic characteristics, the 10X is unlikely to leave you hankering for anything more or better for a very long time to come. Best of all is the Luxman "sound": supremely musical yet now with a degree of resolution, detail, and neutrality that will reveal without undue editorializing everything that is on any source you care to feed it. The D-10X is, if by only a slim margin, quite the finest all-in-one CD/SACD/DAC integrated with which PS any sort of long experience. PS, 317

Metronome AQWO 2
$22,000 ($24,300 with tube output stage)
This gorgeous 33-pound CD/SACD player from France's Metronome combines a high-quality disc transport and a highly capable DAC section with a full complement of digital inputs. The Class A solid-state output stage is standard, but a tube output stage, based on a JAN-spec'd 6922, is available as an option. The AQWO is characterized by exceptional dynamics and detail, particularly when playing SACDs. The player is particularly adept at maintaining its clarity during high-level, musically complex passages. The treble performance is very smooth and liquid without sacrificing resolution. The open and airy soundstage makes music come alive, with outstanding resolution of spatial information and imaging detail, and with a "front-row" perspective. AHC, 298

T+A PDT 3100 HV
$23,450
This stunning piece of mechanical and electrical engineering will most likely be partnered with T+A's SDV 3100 HV DAC. But with every type of digital output on its rear panel, the PDT will work with any DAC. The custom CD/SACD transport is built around a massive, high-precision, all-metal disc mechanism designed and built by T+A (as is the control circuitry and software). Touch the front panel's "open" button and the tray silently glides out. This is by far the smoothest and quietest transport RH has encountered. When it is connected by a proprietary link to T+A's SDV 3100 HV, the sound quality from CD and, especially, SACD is spectacularly great. The PDT 3100 HV is a joy to use, built beautifully, and sounds terrific. RH, 301

The XP-22

"Musically meaningful detail and resolution are excellent. If the recording possesses the information, the rendering of space can be dramatic and dynamics startling."
- Andrew Quint, The Absolute Sound, 2022 Editors' Choice Awards

PASS

www.passlabs.com / 13395 New Airport Rd. Ste G., Auburn, CA 95602 / +1(530) 878-5350

dCS Rossini 2.0 APEX
$32,800
The Rossini may be the sweetest of sweet spots within the dCS lineup. All the technical goodies of the latest, far more expensive Vivaldi flagship are here in a single, gorgeous, easy-to-use chassis. The Rossini will play pretty much anything—either locally attached or streamed—other than a physical SACD. And it will play that material, regardless of source, with a rare combination of alacrity, refinement, and musicality. Furthermore, dCS has made good on its promise of product longevity through continual software upgrades. Specifically, the Rossini recently received both Roon and MQA support, making it one of the best all-around player/DACs on the market. AT, 286

Burmester 089
$33,000 (MMI module, $3500)
The real business of the Burmester belt-driven CD player is the music. Here, in addition to pace and drama, this German unit demonstrates a rare ability to bring out details and inner lines without letting them trip over each other. Instead, they meld and interact exactly as the composer and musicians intended. The effect, AT says, quoting a highly discriminating audiophile friend, is "so satisfying I could use a cigarette." AT, 212

CH Precision D1.5
$41,000–$47,500 (depending on input/output configuration) Optional X1 power supply $17,000
When paired with the companion CH Precision C1 DAC/Pre, the D1 becomes a formidable digital front end. The two communicate via the company's proprietary CH Link, and once you hear its open, natural sound, you will never go back to SPDIF. Furthermore, the CH Link can carry raw DSD straight from an SACD to the C1. The combination of D1, C1, and CH Link results in the best SACD sound AT has yet heard. As a stand-alone digital front end, the D1 is excellent but more expensive than viable alternatives. Nor can one leverage the D1's raw DSD capability if not mating it to the C1. The bottom line is: Buy the D1 with the C1. AT, 239 (D1 reviewed)

Kalista DreamPlay XC
$76,300
The high-end French audio company Kalista markets the DreamPlay XC as a "universal digital source," and given that it combines four devices (CD/SACD player, streamer, DAC, and digital preamp with Leedh volume control) in one gorgeous, touchscreen-equipped chassis, cleverly suspended on an optional anti-vibration base and powered by a large outboard supply, it kinda is. Beyond its remarkable versatility, what makes the DreamPlay so special is its sound, which, to JV's ear, is highly reminiscent of that of the superb Soulution 760 DAC, which is to say the DreamPlay has an analog-like liquidity, density of timbre, and three-dimensionality rarely found in digital playback components. Of course, it also offers the resolution, dynamics, and bass that we rightly associate with ones and zeroes, but it offers them without any of the thinning down or whiting out of body and timbre or the etching of transients that we (or some of us) also associate with digital sources. Played back on its built-in CD/SACD player, physical discs are particularly natural sounding. Indeed, with CDs and SACDs the DreamPlay XC sets a new standard for analog-like musicality in digital replay. As a disc player, this is a world-class unit that JV (not one of digital audio's most ardent fans) could happily live with until the cows come home from wherever they go when they're out and about. JV, 344

DIGITAL-TO-ANALOG CONVERTERS

Under $1000

iFi Zen DAC
$99
The Zen DAC offers a lot of features and high sound quality at an entry-level price. When it is mated with other high-performance components, SS found the results reference or near-reference level, though the Zen does require careful system-matching and quality cables that will likely cost far more than the DAC itself. Ideal users for the Zen DAC fall into two groups: younger, newly minted audiophiles looking for good sound on a budget for nearfield listening; and older ones looking for an inexpensive way to add MQA DAC capabilities and a decent headphone amplifier to their room-based reference systems. The former will use all the Zen DAC's features, while a majority of the latter will set it on fixed output and use it as a basic DAC. Both win. SS, 313 (V2 version not reviewed)

AudioQuest DragonFly Cobalt
$199
AudioQuest's thumb-drive-sized DragonFly series has been wildly successful—and for good reason. Inside this diminutive, plug-and-play package resides both a hi-res DAC (up to 96/24) and a surprisingly good headphone amp. Cobalt, is the best DragonFly yet. Cobalt sports upgraded DAC, processor, and USB receiver chips, as well as new jitter-reduction technology. AudioQuest also revised the digital filter. While preserving what made previous DragonFlies (Black & Red) such winners—plug-and-play installation, analog volume control, full MQA decoding, and, most importantly, a thoroughly enjoyable listening experience—Cobalt improves upon their sonics in subtle but meaningful ways. RH, 270, AT, 302

Schiit Modius
$229–$249
In the bad old days, between 1980 and 2000, decent-sounding digital devices were almost universally expensive, to the point that it was generally assumed and often stated by audio experts that inexpensive digital products were garbage unless heavily modified. The Modius balanced-output DAC is one of the latest of the new-generation DACs that challenge that old assumption. It delivers great sound from PCM files and has enough digital input options for most systems, but it does not support MQA or DSD files and has no user-alterable digital filter settings. However, if you want a simple and simply great just-the-facts DAC, Modius fills the bill. SS, 311

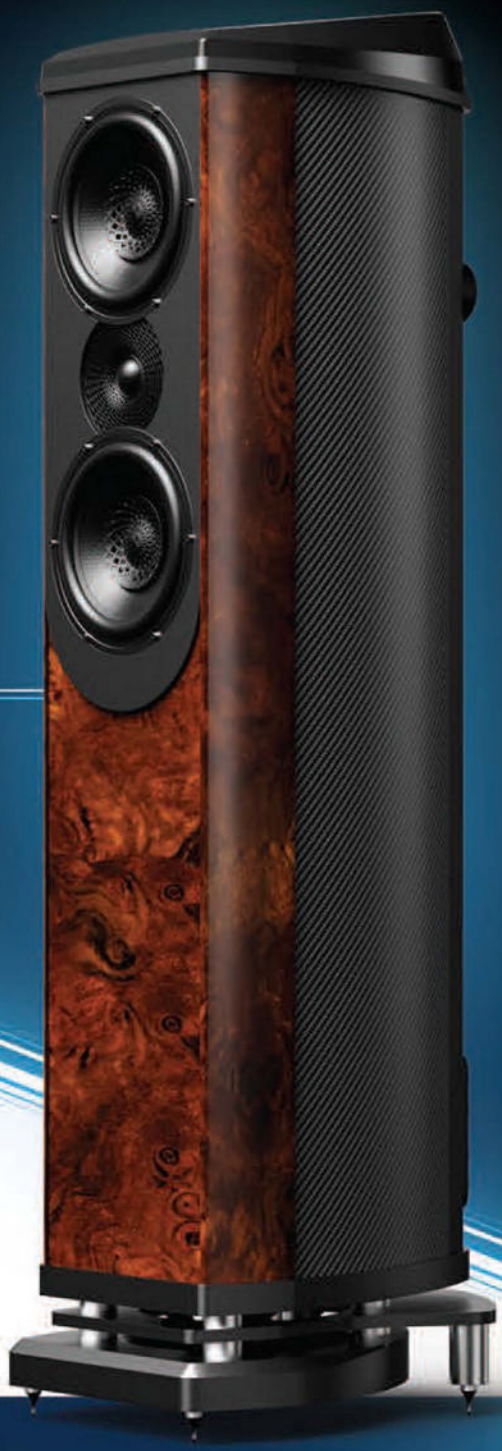
iFi xDSD
$399
The iFi xDSD is perfect for this portable or desktop amp, a young mobile listener and older audiophiles who want to add streaming and hi-res to their existing system for a fraction of the price of their primary DAC. Both types of audiophiles will be pleased by the xDSD's flexibility, utility, performance level, and overall value. SS, 289

Cambridge Audio DacMagic 200
$499
A truly wonderful little DAC that bridges the gap between the most affordable ones and the mid-priced $1000+ units.

DEVELOPED THROUGH 30+ YEARS
OF ITERATIVE DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT

A.C.T. 3Zero Speaker

FIBONACCI
SILK-CARBON
HYBRID TWEETER



INFRASONIC GENERATOR
18" CARBON FIBER + PET DIAPHRAGM
PUSH-PULL MOTOR AROUND STEEL CORE

IGx Woofer

SCAN CODE FOR MORE INFO

Wilson benesch
THE FUTURE IS CARBON

Aaudio imports
distributor of high end audio

OFFICIAL USA IMPORTER
Dana Point, California

303-264-8831

This is the most feature-laden model yet in the well-received DacMagic line, and the first to incorporate full MQA decoding. Muse Kastanovich judged the sound to be truly excellent, with natural weight and completeness, almost up to the standards of the twice-the-price Cambridge CXN v2. Packed with features like headphone and balanced XLR outputs, Bluetooth and USB inputs, selectable filters, DSD and MQA, and volume control, the DacMagic 200 can function as a digital preamp, too. DM, 322

Bluesound Node
$599
The Node from Bluesound is a music server, streamer, and DAC that accesses most of the popular streaming services and internet radio, as well as music files off hard drives and NAS drives, all sans computer, while offering full MQA unfolding and rendering (but no DSD). Consistent with its NAD provenance, the Node 3i sounds really, really good—so far above its size and price that it almost makes you feel you've stolen something. On many digital sources it often took the most concentrated and critical listening to distinguish the Node from considerably higher-priced competition, even in direct A/B comparisons. PS, 308 (Node 2i reviewed; Node review forthcoming)

Schiit Audio Bifrost 2
$799–$829
The Bifrost 2 is a "True Multibit" DAC, combined with Schiit's custom in-house digital filter. It includes Schiit's new Unison USB, which is its proprietary custom USB input. Schiit took the original Bifrost and gave it some custom upgrades: a new power supply, a new 18-bit Analog Devices AD5781ARUZ D/A converter, and its new custom USB. The Bifrost 2 accepts formats up to 24/192 for all inputs (USB, coax, optical). Reviewer DK found it was dynamically tight, rhythmically appealing, and honest when it came to source files. It had an unrelenting edge that rewarded quality and revealed every little flaw. Highly recommended for anyone in search of an accurate, laser-focused DAC. DK, 309

Soekris dac1421
$899
Built in Denmark and designed by Søren Kristensen, this DAC serves as a prime example of the adage that good things come in small packages. It is switchable between line and headphone output and includes a digital volume control. All Soekris DACs feature discrete R-2R sign-magnitude resistive ladders. The DAC can accommodate up to DoP128 and DSD256 data on the USB input. Four anti-aliasing filters may be selected, giving the user enormous flexibility in tailoring the DAC's sonic signature to particular tastes. With the digital filter set to soft Butterworth, the Soekris equals or exceeds the performance of TDA1543-based DACs in terms of analog-like sound quality, offering better imaging, enhanced transient clarity, and superior resolution. DO, 311

Topping D90SE
$899
The D90SE would not exist except for the fact that Topping's previous flagship, the D90MQA, used a top-of-the-line AKM DAC chip. AKM had a catastrophic fire in its factory, which curtailed all its DAC-chip production. Topping had no choice but to redesign its DACs to use ESS chips. The D90SE may be a Johnny-come-lately specifications champion from a Chinese manufacturer with a limited track record with audiophiles here in the United States, but SS can only say that, after his listening, he found the D90SE to be exactly what it purports to be—a well-designed digital audio converter that performs on a par with reference DACs he has used in the past. SS, 326

$1000–$3000

Cambridge CXN-2
$1099
The CXN-2 provides a good-sounding entry into the world of streaming media without costing a fortune. It is supplied with the Cambridge Connect app, which makes selecting and managing music easier than Tidal's native app. The CXN-2's small front-panel screen is hard to read unless you're up close. The sound quality is a significant step up from the integral DACs in Cambridge's integrated amplifiers, with more space, a smoother tonal balance, greater refinement, and more powerful dynamic impacts. DM, 311

Chord Qutest
$2125
The Chord Qutest integrates the entire frequency spectrum in a holistic way that just sounds right—not too soft or hard, detailed without being harsh, and relaxed without being flaccid. With the Qutest, SS heard a certain "rightness" to the sound that he could live with happily for a long time. If you have a basic but flagship-level DAC that is more than ten years old, and you have been thinking about modernizing, SS would strongly recommend trying the Qutest before replacing your DAC with something with an additional zero at the end of its price tag. SS, 293

Schiit Audio Yggdrasil
$2299–$2799
This barebones DAC (no networking, no DSD, no MQA, Spartan chassis) sounds spectacularly great. When playing PCM sources (the bread-and-butter source for most listeners) the Yggy competes with some really expensive DACs. Designed by industry legend Mike Moffat, it sounds very much like the famous Theta Digital DACs that Moffat designed in the 1980s and 1990s—but better. Like the Theta DACs of yore, the Yggy has a bold, assertive, vibrant, even vivid presentation. It's a spectacular performer on an absolute level, an out-of-this world bargain, and was our choice for DAC of the Year in 2017. RH, 273

M2Tech MK4
$2999
This meticulously crafted two-unit server with external linear power supply can run Roon, Roon utilizing Squeezebox, or Squeezebox with your favorite UPnP software. From a sonic perspective it checks every audiophile box. Layering and dynamics are unrestricted no matter the musical genre, and vocals are velvety and luxurious, but never high viscosity. Rock is passionately reproduced with snap, punch, rhythm, and texture. It reproduces small- and large-scale dynamic shifts with ease. Piano's difficult tonal complexities often challenge the best music servers, but they were just another day at the concert hall for the M2Tech. It easily belongs with components at or twice its price. MC, 302 (original Mk2/Mk3 version reviewed)

$3000–$10,000

PrimaLuna EVO 100
$3395
With sweet, accurate mid-range sonics and sturdy construction that should last a long time, this mid-

SNAKE RIVER AUDIO

Silver, gold and copper are the absolute best precious metals to use when it comes to getting the ultimate performance from your system. That's why we only use pure 24k gold, pure red copper, and .999 pure silver in our cables. Only the absolute best.

"Well worth seeking out, Snake River Audio cables embody authentic high-end audio values, dollar value, and performance that just never gets old."

-Neil Gader, The Absolute Sound, Issue #328

Every one of our award-winning cables is custom made, by-hand, for every order.

VETERAN OWNED BUSINESS

SnakeRiverAudio.com

Snake River Audio ... because it is impossible to mass-produce TRUE quality

AMG ONE

(Mono amp. $ 1,450)

NuPrime AMG ONE is a scaled-down version of NuPrime Evolution Two with RMS power of 170W@8 Ohm and 220W@4 Ohm and offers a breakthrough in distortion reduction.

AMG ONE's Only Distortion Cancellation design significantly reduces distortion, results in a natural and pure sound characteristics, with faster dynamics and Class-A-like warmth. It offers exceptional clarity and detail, making it a true audio masterpiece.

THD+N of 0.003% @1kHz(5W), 0.004@ 1kHz(50W) and < 0.006% THD+N at 1KHZ(2W~80W)

NUPRiME www.nuprimeaudio.com beyond ordinary

priced tube DAC has a stout tube-rectified power supply for each channel. While that's unusual for a DAC, it assures dynamic range will be wide and dynamic shifts lightning fast. Perhaps the EVO 100 is missing the very deepest lows and highest highs, but there's not much else to quibble about. VF, 300

Bryston BDA-3.14
$4195
The goal of the BDA-3.14 was simple in theory, but more challenging in practice—to add a streaming function to the BDA-3 platform while retaining the same high sound quality as the BDA-3. Reviewer Steven Stone thinks Bryston's efforts were successful. The DAC section for the BDA-3.14 is built around a pair of AK4490 chips, just like that of the BDA-3. Instead of building a server from scratch Bryston began with a Raspberry Pi 3 minicomputer as its internet gateway device. Why a Pi? Because it works reliably and has excellent and continuing support from Pi. In short, the BDA-3.14 is a first-class component that could be the center of any high-performance digital audio system. SS, 309

Lampizator Baltic 4
$6500
This ultra-tweaky tube based DAC from Poland features tubes in the audio circuit as well as in the power supply. The Baltic 3's reproduction of timbre is exemplary, both with respect to accuracy and resolution of subtle harmonics. While it's particularly strong at imaging and soundstaging and at resolving, layering, and spatially defining complex musical presentations (e.g. symphonies, bands, or complex recordings), it's just as beguiling on recordings with minimal instruments or solo vocals. Reproduction across the frequency range is deep, wide, and full, from string bass or bass drums in the lower octaves to the extension and shimmer of cymbals and bells in the upper registers. While all these attributes are accurate in describing the Baltic, for a potential customer I think it's more meaningful to say that it creates such immersive, beguiling, and engaging experiences. SSc, 323, (original Baltic 3 version reviewed)

Chord Hugo TT2/M Scaler
$6725/$5650
The Hugo TT employs a proprietary and sophisticated "long-tap" digital filter that reportedly results in waveforms from standard-resolution sources as accurate as those of hi-res ones. The DAC section is also custom and supports PCM up to 768kHz and up to DSD512. The Hugo TT sounds superb on its own, but the performance is taken up several notches with the addition of the Hugo M scaler, which upsamples all incoming signals to 768kHz with an FPGA. The result truly represents a new way forward in digital audio—one where standard 16/44 material in every way sounds as good as (or better than) even the highest-resolution files. A technical and musical triumph. CM, 295

PS Audio DAC Mk2
$7999
PS Audio's popular DirectStream DAC has been newly updated in 2023. Unlike most DACs that use off-the-shelf chips, the DirectStream is built from the ground up with a custom DAC created on a field-programmable gate array (FPGA) running proprietary software. The unit upsamples the signal to 20x DSD for conversion by the gate array. The DirectStream sounds considerably better than its predecessor (which reviewer Anthony Cordesman has owned for eight years), offering tremendous resolution of soundstage information and spatial cues. Reproduction of low-level information is also a strong suit, with very fine detail rendered against a jet-black background. AHC, 346

$10,000 and above

Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Series 3
$10,995
Berkeley's Alpha DAC Series 3 attempts to bring much of the performance of the company's vaunted Reference DAC 3 to a product that is less than half the Reference's price. The Alpha DAC has superb resolution of low-level detail, three-dimensional soundstaging (with the ability to convey very fine timbral and spatial information at the back of the hall), dense tone color, and outstanding clarity. The Alpha 3 doesn't have quite the world-class performance of the Berkeley Reference Series 3 DAC, but it comes closer than you'd expect for less than half the price. The Alpha DAC Series 3 is the DAC to beat at anywhere near this price if you don't' need DSD decoding or network connectivity. RH, 320

Brinkmann Nyquist Mk II
$19,990
The Nyquist is brimming with advanced features, including MQA decoding, high-speed DSD support, Roon-ready operation, UPnP connectivity, and upgradeable digital circuitry. Yet for all its cutting-edge digital prowess, the Nyquist's output stage is built around that most ancient and venerable of audio technologies, the vacuum tube. This marriage produces a sound that is very "non-digital," embodying all the qualities that analog is famous for—dimensionality, treble smoothness, bloom, timbral purity—but coupled with digital's strengths of image solidity, pitch stability, and bass impact. The combination of analog-like warmth, bloom, and ease along with the state of the art in digital connectivity makes the Nyquist an extremely compelling package. The newly updated digital section of the Mk.II improves performance and verifies Brinkmann's claims of easy field-upgradability. RH, 278; JHb, 301

Wadax Akasa Reference DC Cables and Reference PSU
$20,400 each/$52,700
It's one thing to design and build a state-of-the-art digital playback system; it's another to significantly improve upon that system's performance for existing owners. That's exactly what Wadax has done with the Reference DAC and Reference Server; the company recently began offering upgraded Akasa DC Reference Cables that connect the DAC to its two external power supplies, as well as the Reference PSU, an outboard supply that replaces the Server's integral supply. But how much difference can there be between cables carrying DC? A lot, surprisingly. We should no longer be shocked by anything in audio, but replacing the stock DC cables with the Akasa cables resulted in a wholesale improvement of what was already the state of the art in digital playback. The immediate impression is one of greater clarity, transparency, and resolution—the feeling that a scrim between listener and the music has been removed. The midrange through the treble is more open and airier, with greater life, presence, and immediacy; yet, at the same time, textures are lusher and more liquid. The Reference

Accuphase

NEW LOWER PRICING, SAME PRECISION & QUALITY.

Seems like the price of everything is going up lately. But not here. We're excited to be rolling out new, inflation-crushing prices in the United States. Visit **accuphase.com,** then head to your nearest Accuphase dealer to experience impeccable quality sound and shop the new pricing that's as much as 25% less.

AXISS AUDIO

ACCUPHASE | BEAUDIOFUL | FRANCO SERBLIN | GAUDER AKUSTIK | NIHON ONKYO ENGINEERING
REED | SHELTER | SOULUTION | TRANSROTOR | YUKISEIMITSU AUDIO | ZENSATI | AIRTIGHT

Go to **axissaudio.com** to find an Accuphase dealer near you.

PSU, the external power supply for the server, is equally impressive, delivering a similar sonic improvement. Together, the Reference DC Cables and Reference PSU somehow managed to elevate the already stellar performance of the Wadax products. These Wadax upgrades represent high-end audio at its best—the relentless pursuit of musical realism realized with cutting-edge technical innovation. RH, 344

dCS Bartók Apex
$20,950 ($22,950 with Class A headphone amp; Apex upgrade for existing owners, $9000)
Upgrade and improve the Bartók, dCS's entry-level streaming DAC? NG' was skeptical. However, the collection of sophisticated advancements known as Apex does the unthinkable: It furthers what Bartók began and then surpasses it—and not by a small margin. It remains as tonally accurate as an atomic clock, but its voice has opened further exhibiting greater bloom and wider micro/macro dynamic swings. It's like witnessing a recording from inside the microphone capsule–from opening transient to the last gasp of acoustic decay—calling to mind the finest LP playback. Apex is not inexpensive, but the sonic improvements are a triumph of naturalism and harmonic detail that will floor even the most jaded audio listeners. NG, 300, 344

Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series 3
$28,000
Just when RH thought the Alpha DAC Reference couldn't get any better, software updates and a new hardware board vaulted the Series 3 into a new league of excellence. The Series 3 embodies all the qualities that have made this DAC a top contender—exquisite resolution of the finest timbral and spatial detail; tremendous dimensionality clarity, and openness without etch or brightness; liquidity; precise rendering of music's dynamic structure; and an overall sense of hearing back through the playback chain to the microphone feed. The Series 3 improves on all these qualities and presents greater bass extension and rhythmic flow. The Series 3 renders more information on standard-res files than RH through possible, and MQA decoding takes the performance to the next level. The Series 3 lacks a USB input (you'll need Berkeley's $2495 Alpha USB) and has no networking capabilities or DSD decoding. RH, 279; Series 3, 298

MSB Technology Reference DAC
$54,500 (DAC base price includes Femto 33 clock & preamp output module)
JV is an analog man and always will be. But when it comes to ones and zeroes, things have taken a rather dramatic turn for the better *chez* Valin since the arrival of the highly modular MSB Reference DAC. On physical media such as CD or SACD and on streaming sources, the Reference DAC is one of the two most realistic-sounding digital source components JV has heard in his home (the other being the Soulution 760). On select cuts from select discs (or on streamed material, particularly hi-res MQA) the MSB has the colorless neutrality, speed, detail, presence, dynamic range, and delicacy that make voices and instruments sound real enough to raise goosebumps. This is the ear-opener JV has been waiting for in a digital source, and TAS' well-deserving 2018 Overall Product of the Year. JV, 290

Soulution 760
$69,975
Coming from a company better known for its superb solid-state amps and preamps than for its digital source components, the Soulution 760 DAC was, for JV, the surprise of the 2020 audio season. Indeed, it turned out to be such a game-changer that—if you listen only or primarily to ones and zeroes—he would be hard put to recommend anything else over it, regardless of price, and only the MSB Reference alongside it. Combining a world-class linestage (comparable to Soulution's own 725) with Leedh Processing volume control (the first DAC to use Gilles Milot's celebrated algorithm) and an ultra-wide-bandwidth, ultra-low-distortion, ingeniously phase-corrected DAC, the 760 offers so much more of what JV likes and expects to hear from the best recorded music that it virtually lives in a class of its own. Here, finally, is the whole package—air, bloom, space, dimensionality, dynamic scale, electrifying transient response (on electrifying transients), fabulous low end, and (for once) equally fabulous treble. TAS' deserving 2020 DAC of the Year award-winner. JV, 311

dCS Vivaldi Apex
$140,000
The four-box Vivaldi is unquestionably the state of the art in functionality and technical sophistication and is in the upper echelon of the best-sounding digital playback. This flagship from dCS incorporates technology unlike that of any other digital product, with all the key sub-systems designed and built by dCS using proprietary hardware and software. Extensive changes to the Ring DAC hardware and power supply ensure a sensationally low noise floor that helps to produce a supple and dynamic sound. Particularly noteworthy is the combination of a density of information, saturation of tone color, bottom-end authority, and highly spacious yet precisely rendered soundstage that outdo the competition. Although the complete system comprises four separate chassis, not all of them are required. The pairing of the Vivaldi Transport and Vivaldi DAC will get you most of the way there. The Vivaldi Clock and Upsampler are nice additions, but not needed to realize the Vivaldi's extraordinary sound quality. Note that the Vivaldi is a highly sophisticated instrument that requires more user involvement than most digital sources. JHb, 268/333

Wadax Atlantis Reference
$175,000 (Akasa DC Reference Cables $40,000 per pair)
Although astronomically expensive, Wadax's 180-pound, three-chassis Atlantis Reference DAC is a cost-no-object exercise in what's possible in digital audio playback. The main chassis is three sections combined in an artful way and is powered by two massive outboard power supplies. The Reference is packed with innovative circuitry that is realized with lavish execution. The sonic result is like nothing RH has heard from digital; the Reference DAC has tremendous dimensionality, stunningly realistic timbral rendering, exceptional transient performance, and an overall presentation that is, by a significant margin, the state of the art in digital. The Reference DAC's full performance potential is realized by pairing it with Wadax's Reference Server, Akasa optical interface, and Akasa Reference DC Cables. Although one would think that cables carrying DC from the power supply to the DAC

FELIKS-AUDIO

Based in Lubliniec, Poland, Feliks Audio is a boutique, family-owned manufacturer of handcrafted OTL tube headphone amps and a reference 300B SET speaker amp, all famed for their natural tonal balance and handsome aesthetic.

ENVY

E N V Y

FLAGSHIP HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

"The Feliks Audio Envy headphone amplifier is a masterpiece. For those of you who have not heard what 300B triodes can do to audiophile sound, you don't know what you have been missing."

- JOHN JOHNSON, SECRETS OF HOME THEATER AND HIFI

EUFORIA EVO
HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

ELISE MKII
HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

EXCLUSIVE DISTRIBUTION IN NORTH AMERICA BY HARMONIA DISTRIBUTION. DEALER INQUIRIES WELCOME. HARMONIADISTRIBUTION.COM

are of marginal significance, upgrading the DC cables rendered a surprising improvement in virtually every aspect of performance. RH's reference. RH, 312, 344

MUSIC SERVERS AND PERIPHERAL PRODUCTS

Roon 2.0 Music Management Software

$9.99/mo. billed annually, $12.99/mo. billed monthly

Roon is a computer program that runs on Windows and Macintosh computers and plays back computer-audio files. What distinguishes Roon from other playback programs is the voluminous information it provides about your music. Want to read an album's liner notes? How about the lyrics of a song being performed? Or maybe some information about a composer? Roon provides you with the data. Roon's first job is to sound good, which it does in spades. Roon makes computer audio file playback easier and more fun, factors it desperately needs. By far the most sophisticated music management software, and an indispensable vehicle for exploring music. VF, 258; AT, 286, SS, 315, 334

Muzo Cobblestone

$59

This inexpensive little device provides wireless streaming to any audio system. Although the Cobblestone wouldn't be considered for a reference system, it simply and inexpensively adds internet radio, smartphone streaming, and NAS playback capabilities to a secondary, "lifestyle," or background music system. The Cobblestone produces listenable, if not riveting, sound. The Cobblestone's overall harmonic balance is slightly dark, with forgiving highs and a warmish upper bass and lower midrange. When compared in a direct A/B with the Sonos Connect's analog output SS found that Cobblestone was the Sonos' equal in every sonic respect except one—the Cobblestone could play 96/24 files while the Sonos could not. SS, 268

Channel D Software Pure Music and Pure Vinyl

$129 Pure Music; $379 Pure Vinyl

Ripping your LP collection to digital files has never been easier, thanks to Pure Vinyl. The graphic user interface, which looks like an LP surface, allows you to quickly and precisely pinpoint the beginnings of tracks. Pure Vinyl supports transfers at any sample-size and bit-rate used by your analog-to-digital converter. When it is coupled with Channel D's Seta phonostage, the process is improved and simplified. Additionally, the Seta can be set so that it doesn't perform RIAA equalization; EQ is then realized in the digital domain by Pure Vinyl. SS, 238

iFi Zen Stream

$399

As you might surmise from its name, the Zen Stream is a streaming endpoint. As an endpoint with both USB 3.0 and SPDIF outputs, it can deliver internet and networked music sources to any DAC with either USB or SPDIF inputs. If you have a great DAC that doesn't have a USB input that you would like to use with networked sources, the Zen Stream makes that possible. The Zen Stream supports many streaming sources via Wi-Fi or Ethernet including Spotify, Tidal, Roon, AirPlay, Chromecast, DLNA, and NAA (Network Audio Adapter). It has no file-size, file-type, or library-size limits. The Zen Streamer may well be the most hassle-free, flexible, and high-quality music streamer currently available. SS, 322

Sonore opticalModule DeluxeV.3

$499 (plus power supply)

The opticalModule Deluxe is a bi-directional fiber-media converter or FMC with a high-precision femto clock. Its main function is to remove jitter from network sources and streams to improve digital sound. As part of a fiber-optic network link, it functions like an EtherRegen, and can be used on the upstream side with one, with a second OMD, or with an inexpensive generic FMC, as reviewed. Muse Kastanovich felt it made a significant overall improvement to the sonic qualities of all streaming sources coming in from the network. Soundstage, reverb, and harmonics were all more organic and convincing. DM, 322 (reviewed original Optical Module Deluxe)

SOtM sMS-200 Mini Network Player

$500

SOtM's sMS-200 plays just about any type of music files stored on a network or an external USB drive. A versatile software collection called Eunhasu includes the popular Roon software (a two-month trial) and several other capable playback programs. A quality USB output connects to a DAC. An upscale version, the sMS-200ultra, adds a high-precision clock for even better sound, but increases the price to $1200. VF, 286

PS Audio Bridge II Network Card

$899

This user-installable card in PS Audio's DirectStream DAC adds MQA compatibility to the DirectStream. The Bridge II Network card doesn't make the DirectStream an MQA decoder; rather, the Bridge II performs the first MQA "unfold" step that converts a 44.1kHz or 48kHz MQA file to 96kHz PCM for decoding by the DirectStream. This offers the benefits of the higher sample rate but not the advantages of full MQA decoding. AHC, 278

GeerFab D.BOB (Digtal BreakOut Box)

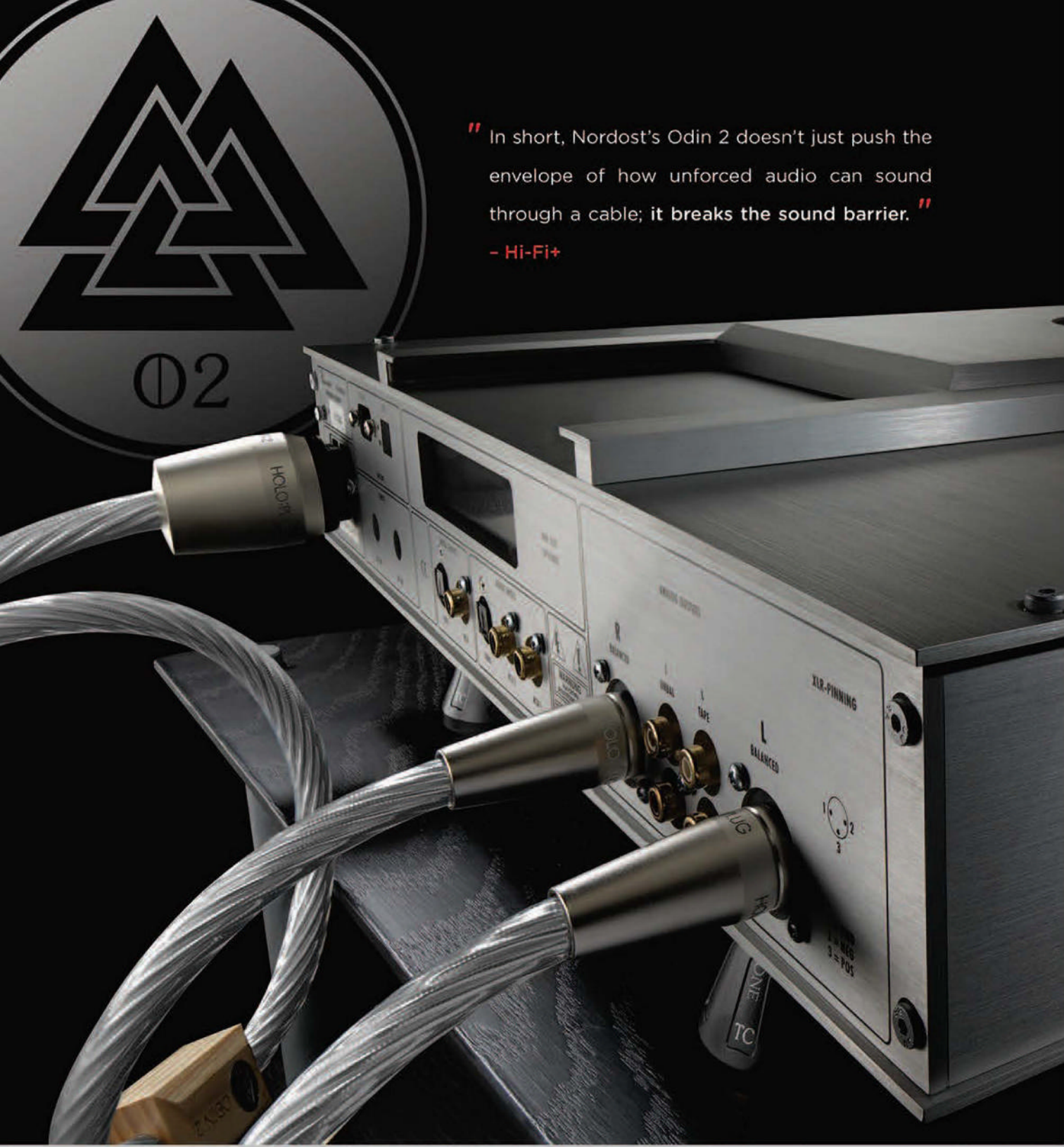
$999

GeerFab's D.BOB device promises to allow you to use the DAC of your choice with a Blu-ray, SACD, CD, CDR, or virtually any recognized-by-your-player silver or golden disc, if your disc player has an HDMI output. Adding the D.BOB to your system is relatively simple, merely connect your player's HDMI output to the D.BOB's HDMI input, and then connect the D.BOB's SPDIF or TosLink output to your DAC. The D.BOB is capable of handling up to PCM 192/24 and DSD64. If you have a large collection of high-resolution discs, the D.BOB gives you a future-proof way to continue to enjoy them into the foreseeable future. SS, 309

Sonore Ultra Rendu Renderer V.3

$999 (Ultra Power Supply 7 Vdc with DC Cable, $795)

This unusual device takes files sent by an external server, which you must also provide, and plays, or renders, them, which means it converts digital music files in the usual variety of formats to a bitstream a DAC can handle; and that DAC, of course, must have a USB 2.0 input. It is compatible with PCM files up to 768kHz sampling rate and DSD512. The microRendu produced a significant improvement in transparency, detail resolution, spatiality, timbral realism, and overall sound quality. Note that you need to buy a separate power supply, like Sonore's own at $795. VF, 280



ODIN 2

SUPREME REFERENCE CABLES

NORDOST

LEARN MORE

www.nordost.com

Audiopraise VanityPRO Multichannel HDMI Extractor
$1899
The availability of discrete multichannel recordings in which "surround sound" production serves the musical ends of a performance has never been greater. The fly in the ointment for many critical listeners, however, has been the ubiquitous HDMI interface which, though a dependable conduit for a video signal, too often introduces a great deal of jitter to the audio stream. The VanityPRO re-clocks the audio signal delivered by your HDMI cable, employing the incoming data rate rather than the extremely jittery TMDS clock that HDMI uses to get the data from the source to the DAC. The effect of this engineering legerdemain is a seamless tonal continuity throughout the frequency spectrum and more dynamic nuance that better allows for an enhanced spatial presentation—either an attempt to render the natural acoustic of a specific venue or the synthetic intentions of an imaginative pop/rock producer—to register completely. Be advised: The VanityPRO's technology won't work with newer "immersive" codecs such as Dolby Atmos, but multichannel enthusiasts with large collections of PCM or DSD discs and/or files may find the Audiopraise VanityPro to be indispensable. AQ, 344

Bryston BDP-3
$4495
The BDP-3 digital player is a technological *tour de force* that bridges generational divides: between the Old World CD player and the New World of high-resolution files and music-library management. The BDP-3 performs the same function as a CD transport but plays data files from removable USB storage media at their native resolution and in a multiplicity of file formats. The BDP-3 uses the same digital audio circuitry as the BDP-1 and BDP-2, but like the BDP-2 incorporates a more powerful system board and a correspondingly heftier power supply. Processor speed and memory capacity are also increased. Connectivity is expanded to include an internal SATA connection, an eSATA port, two gigabit Ethernet ports, and six full-current USB 2.0 ports. The Bryston BDP-3 doesn't merely "sound better," the experience of hearing music through it is qualitatively different. It plays music with unprecedented purity. KS, 259

Baetis Audio Revolution X4
$6200
The Revolution X3 is in the middle of Baetis Audio's product range, a compact component (13¼" wide) with plenty of connectivity—proprietary SPDIF and AES/EBU outputs plus plenty of USB ports, one of which can be upgraded to an SOtM interface with or without a premium clock card. Supplied with the machine is a beefy Neutrik power cord, a substantial external power supply, 4TB of media storage, and—most critically—customer service that's second to none in the industry. New owners are scheduled for a block of one-on-one instruction to assure that their X3 has been configured according to their wishes and that they know how to use it. Unnecessary "bloatware" has been removed from the Windows OS to optimize sonic performance. AQ, 313

Linn Selekt DSM
From $6370 (configurable)
Linn's complete reworking of its Network Music Player platform offers an engaging level of convenience, functionality, and, especially, performance from an all-in-one streaming solution—a class of product that Linn defined and popularized. With 50Wpc on tap combined with a simple user experience with clean, incisive, and accurate sonics, the Selekt DSM exemplifies why Linn is so successful within this segment. The combination of its distinctly neutral and articulate sound, taken to the next level using Space Optimisation (Linn's native room-correction technology), lifts this re-designed modular solution to the top of the list of a growing number of similarly conceived products. GW, 300

Aurender ACS10
$6500
The Aurender ACS10 was created to be an almost-complete one-box server solution. It's a stand-alone digital hub designed to interface with an external DAC via a USB connection. Merely add the USB-enabled DAC of your choice and you have an entire digital front end capable of doing virtually anything and everything a computer/NAS/streamer system can do, and more. If your goal is to acquire a streamer source that will deliver the highest possible level of sonic quality currently available from higher-resolution streaming sources, handle all the ripping and storage, and do this elegantly, you will be hard-pressed to find a better, more comprehensive, self-contained hardware/software option than the Aurender ACS10. SS, 300

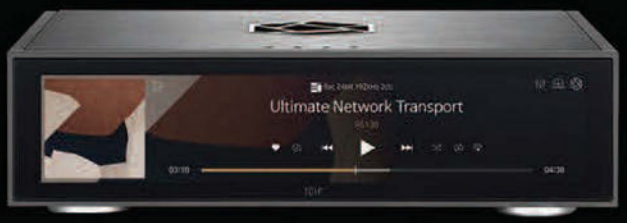
Fidata HFAS1-XS20U Network Audio Server
$7500 (2TB version)
This beautifully built solid-state drive from Japan is designed for ultimate performance. The unit is built around the highest quality solid-state memory chips (1TB or 2TB arrays) encased in a massive vibration-resistant chassis. The power supply, output clocking, network isolation, and other design features are optimized for uncompromised audio performance. Although supplied with a dedicated music-management app, the HFAS1 can also be accessed through Roon. The sound quality of network streaming from the Fidata is exceptional, with greater resolution of low-level detail, a larger soundstage, and more natural rendering of timbre when compared with the same files played from an HDD through a USB interface. SSc, 319

432 EVO Aeon
$7800
The "432" in this Belgian manufacturer's name refers to the idea that music pitched at A = 432Hz is more enjoyable—maybe even better for your health. The Aeon will change the pitch of whatever it is you're auditioning to A = 432, or to one of several other target tunings. Thankfully, this conversion can be readily defeated, and one still has at his or her disposal an exceptionally versatile and good-sounding digital source. 432 EVO's servers (USB output only) are Linux-based, ready to accept either Roon or the (free) Logitech Media Server as the music organizing and playback software. A wide range of PCM and DSD formats are supported, and there are ten digital filters to choose among. The Aeon comes with two linear power supplies sourced from the Dutch company, SBooster, one for the SoTM USB card and a second for the rest of the computer. AQ, 327

Lumin P1
$10,000
The P1's extensive feature set delivers exactly the right

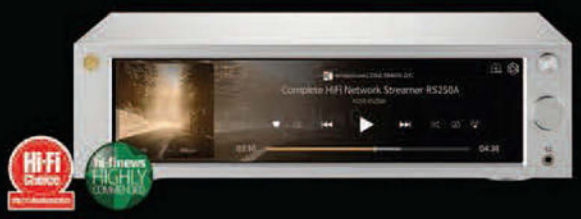
rose

Experience Quality You Can Touch & Hear With HiFi Rose.
Advancing The Future Of Network Streaming and Power Amplification.



NEW!
RS130 Network Transport

The ultimate digital audio source for any high-end hi-fi system. Just connect to your existing DAC!



RS250A Complete HiFi Network Streamer

"It's easy to look at the video playback functionality and assume that it's a gimmick, but the core functionality is so well sorted that it can be judged as a sober and carefully engineered network streamer that's absolutely competitive with anything at the price."

- Ed Selley, HiFi Choice

RS520 All-In-One Integrated Amp & Streamer

"HiFi Rose brings it all together in this highly accomplished all-in-one unit. There's plenty to play with, or you can just connect your favourite speakers and get on with enjoying the music. Highly flexible, and packed with features you'll use"

- Andrew Everard, HiFi News

RA180 Integated Amplifier

RS150B Flagship Network Streamer

TIDAL roon qobuz Listen on Apple Music

MoFi DISTRIBUTION

Learn More & Shop Online HiFiRoseUSA.com
Distributed in the U.S.A. & Canada by MoFi Distribution
info@mofi.com | 312.738.5025 | mofidistribution.com

All Spotify trademarks, service marks, trade names, logos, domain names, and any other features of the Spotify brand are the sole property of Spotify or its licensors.
Apple Music services are protected as registered or unregistered trademarks owned by Apple Inc. and its subsidiaries. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

functionality for today's music systems—all from a compact one-box component. This Roon-ready streamer includes a superb MQA-compatible DAC along with nine digital and analog inputs with source switching and a volume control, obviating the need for a separate preamplifier. Just connect to a network and run the analog outputs (balanced or unbalanced) to your power amplifier. There are even HDMI inputs with Audio Return Channel (ARC) for using the P1 in a multimedia system. Lumin has overcome the main drawback of a digital preamplifier—a digital volume control—by including sophisticated Leedh processing that adjusts the volume with no loss of resolution. If you want music storage, simply add Lumin's L1 external HDD (2TB or 5TB), which is extremely easy to configure. Best of all, the P1's sound quality is superb—commensurate with stand-alone, bare-bones $10k DACs. RH, 330

Baetis Audio Reference 4
$12,000
In their computer-based music servers, Baetis vociferously rejects the standard deployment of the universal serial bus (USB) as the default digital interface between a music computer's motherboard and a DAC, maintaining that transporting audio data within a USB signal generates deleterious digital noise. Earlier Baetis designs achieved notable sonic results with a coaxial SPDIF output terminated with a BNC connector; now the company has determined that a higher-voltage SPDIF takes the playback of high-resolution stereo audiophiles to an even higher level of fidelity. To AQ, the Baetis Reference 3 achieves the closest approach yet to musical realism in digital's frustrating history. AQ, 313

Aurender N20
$12,500
The Aurender N20 slots in one position lower than its $23,000, state-of-the-art W20SE. Beautifully built and finished, the N20 sports outstanding transparency, resolution, and three-dimensionality. If you want a beautifully made audio streamer that supports on-board file storage, seamless integration with streaming services or a NAS, and is a veritable snap to set-up, the N20 bears serious consideration. With well-mastered recordings, it consistently delivered some of the best-sounding digital music for any attributes one would care to discuss. SSc, 326

Lumin X1
$13,990
The X1 is Lumin's fully featured flagship. It serves as a streamer, DAC, and digital preamplifier, has its own dedicated smartphone app, and is Roon compatible. Unlike some streaming devices, the Lumin X1 does not have any internal hard drives, which ensures that the X1 will never need to be opened to have a drive replaced. The X1 does everything you would expect from a premium audiophile product—it looks cool, operates flawlessly, accepts firmware updates, and has its own app. It also performs as well sonically as any streamer/DAC/preamplifier SS has ever had in his clutches. Low-level detail through the Lumin X1 is exemplary, as is customer service from Source Systems, Lumin's U.S. distributor. Recently updated with Leedh digital signal processing. SS, 300

Innuos Statement
$18,900 1TB, $19,300 2TB, $20,100 4TB, $21,700, 8TB
This meticulously crafted two-unit server with an external linear power supply offers the opportunity to run Roon, Roon utilizing Squeezebox (a tad glitchy but worth the glitches), or Squeezebox with your favorite UPnP software. From a sonic perspective it checks every audiophile box. Layering and dynamics are unrestricted no matter the musical genre, and vocals are velvety and luxurious, but never high viscosity. Rock is reproduced with the snap, punch, rhythm, and texture befitting The Beatles, Van Morrison, and Hendrix in their finest live recordings. Piano's difficult tonal complexities, often challenging for the best music servers, are just another day at the concert hall for the Innuos. If you're in the market for a product of this type, you would be doing yourself a serious disservice by not placing the Statement on your final list to consider. MC, 301

Ideon Absolute Stream
$20,000
The Absolute Stream streaming unit from Greece's Ideon Audio is the perfect companion to the company's Absolute Epsilon DAC. The Absolute Stream connects to your home network via Ethernet and outputs digital audio on one of its two USB ports. These ports can drive any DAC directly, but in the review system the Stream's USB output fed the Absolute Time USB re-clocking unit, which in turn drove Ideon's Absolute Epsilon DAC's USB input. The customer can specify no internal music-storage memory in the Absolute Stream or choose between 1TB and 4TB. When used in conjunction with the company's DAC and master clock, the Absolute Stream delivered outstanding performance, with a tremendous sense of dynamics, speed (without etch), and upbeat immediacy. RH, 327

Aurender W20SE
$23,000
The "SE" model that replaces the W20 adds a host of functional and performance upgrades that promises to maintain this music server's status as a reference product. The spinning hard drives have been replaced by 4TB of solid-state memory, and the internal cache memory has been expanded to 1TB (from 240GB). The switching power supply has been replaced with a linear supply; the clock has been upgraded; the unit now supports up to DSD512; it offers improved filtering and isolation of the LAN port; and the user can engage integral PCM upsampling to 384kHz. MQA "Core" decoding is now standard (Core decoding "unfolds" the MQA signal to 88.2 or 96k sample rate). On top of these improvements, the W20 still offers the best user interface and music-management software of any server. RH, 258, 308

Metronome DSC
$28,500
Occasionally, a product comes along that is a true game changer. In the category of streamers, DACs, and digital linestages, the Metronome DSC is such a one. Its secret weapon is banishment of digital noise to a heretofore unheard-of extent. Of course, there's a thick aluminum chassis to reduce RF interference. But the DSC goes a lot further, with an oversized power supply to eliminate any strain in that department, as well as a top-of-the-line ESS DAC chip that incorporates sophisticated jitter reduction. But the DSC's real advancement is the incorporation of a digital

CHOOSE *yours*

As fellow audiophiles, we share your pursuit of perfection. With a long list of Editor's Choice accolades to pick from, it's your turn to decide:

MIMAS integrated amplifier
RHEA phono stage
CALYPSO line stage
JANUS preamplifier
ROMULUS dac + cd
ATLAS hybrid power amplifier
ABCD-1 cartridge demagnitizer

2024 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

AESTHETIX
EST. 1994

MADE BY HAND
USA

www.aesthetix.net

volume control technology called Leedh, which eliminates the noise we've come to take for granted in even the best digital linestages/DACs. Furthermore, the DAC and Roon-ready streaming modules are fully up to the quality of the linestage. The result is an incredibly engaging listening experience. AT, 333

Linn Klimax DSM
$42,000
Linn's Klimax DSM/3 sets a new standard for flexibility, functionality, and audio quality for music servers and streaming DACs. Using the Linn app or Roon, the Klimax DSM/3 can stream files from a music server and a class-leading range of streaming services. Linn's proprietary Space Optimisation software is a breakthrough innovation that removes in-room interactions to provide flexibility in speaker placement, while also maximizing the accuracy of the recording's true soundstage. Linn's Organik D/A conversion engine delivers an exceptionally lifelike and organic quality. The overall tonal palette is neutral with weight, heft, and body to the presentation, and beauty in the rendering and layering of fine inner detail, timbre, and texture. Owners of older DSM units can upgrade to the Organik DAC for $7020. RH, 322, 322

Ideon Absolute Epsilon
$47,000
The designers at Greece's Ideon Audio have imbued their top-of-the-line Absolute Epsilon DAC with a host of proprietary technologies. Rather than use off-the-shelf parts, Ideon has created its own circuits or modified standard parts. Couple this with an elaborate power supply and superb build-quality, and you have a top-shelf DAC. When auditioned with Ideon's Absolute Stream music server ($19,900) and the Absolute Time master clock ($9600), the system had stunningly lifelike reproduction of music's dynamics. The sense of immediacy and presence—the impression of nothing between you and the music—was equally impressive. RH, 327

Wadax Reference Server
$64,900 (Akasa optical interface option, $19,240, outboard Reference PSU, $52,700)
At $84,140 with the Akasa optical interface module, the Wadax Reference Server is priced unlike other music servers. But it also sounds unlike other servers. When connected to the Wadax Reference DAC through the proprietary Akasa optical interface, the combination takes digital playback into uncharted territory. As spectacular as the Reference DAC is, the Server may be the more revolutionary product. It makes garden-variety digital files sound like hi-res remasterings, with tremendous bass clarity, dynamics, articulation, and rhythmic drive. The Reference Server also reveals space, depth, and dimensionality, even on recordings that sound flat and two-dimensional through other sources. The addition of the optional Reference Power Supply Unit (PSU) elevates the performance to another level. A breakthrough in digital replay, and RH's reference. RH, 344

DIGITAL FORMAT CONVERTERS AND CLOCKS

Ideon Audio 3R USB Renaissance
$490
This inexpensive device simply takes in an audio signal from a computer via USB and outputs a cleaner USB signal to your DAC. The "3R" in the model names refers to the device's three functions: "redrive," "re-clock," and "re-generate." The Ideon 3R USB Renaissance will step up the sound quality heard through the USB outputs of most rendering computers, and at a very affordable cost. AQ, 278

Berkeley Audio Design Alpha USB Series 2 Noise Isolating Interface
$2495
Functionally, the Alpha USB does what many sub-$500 devices do: converts USB to SPDIF. But that's where the similarities end. The Alpha USB is not just the best device of its kind; it also provides a state-of-the-art method for getting music out of a computer and into a DAC. Adding the Alpha USB is like sharpening the focus on a camera and snapping images into vivid clarity. The entire presentation becomes more coherent, better resolved, and more lifelike. RH, 214 (Series 2 version forthcoming)

Ideon Absolute Time Master Clock
$9600
The Absolute Time Master Clock operates a little differently from other outboard clocks. Rather than output a clock signal to which the other digital components lock, the Absolute Time takes in USB from any source (most likely Ideon's Absolute Stream server) and outputs USB to a DAC. The Absolute Time isolates the DAC from any noise from the server, as well as re-clocks the signal for greater fidelity. When auditioned with the Ideon Absolute DAC and Absolute Stream, the Absolute Time rendered a significant improvement in textural liquidity, bass definition, and soundstage size, among other attributes. It should be considered mandatory in an Ideon digital front end. RH, 327

TURNTABLES AND RECORD PLAYERS

Under $2000

Pro-Ject T1 Phono SB
$449
The Pro-Ject T1 Phono SB is an attractive entry-level turntable with important ease-of-use upgrades and a high level of fit and finish. It includes a defeatable, built-in phono preamp that sounds very solid, electronic speed switching between 33rpm and 45rpm, and a cartridge pre-mounted and aligned. Unusual at this price, the T1 features a glass (rather than plastic) platter, and the included felt slip mat is simple but effective. Set-up is as easy as it gets, and sound is fantastic—especially at this price point. Overall tone is warm-to-neutral with lively dynamics and a lot of heft, particularly in those more up-beat tunes. It's a fun deck and a fantastic starting point. DK, 339

Rega Planar 1 Plus
$725
The Rega Planar 1 Plus is Rega's entry-level turntable and includes a factory-aligned Carbon cartridge and a built-in phono preamp. Setup couldn't be easier; most people will have it unpacked and spinning records in a matter of minutes. It plays both 33s and 45s, though the upper platter must be removed in order to switch the belt to change speeds. The stock built-in phonostage is the real star here, however. It sounds particularly good, with tight midrange details and a treble that just about sparkles. It's truly a step up from other built-in preamps. A fantastic entry-level option. DK, 295

$1000–$2000

Technics SL-1500C-K
$1299
The Technics SL-1500C is a direct-drive turntable with a

MSB TECHNOLOGY

The Premier DAC

The Discrete DAC

From the makers of the award-winning Reference DAC
we bring the Premier DAC and the Discrete DAC

Delicacy - Beauty - Believability

Two ground breaking DAC models

The Premier DAC and The Discrete DAC have set the benchmark for newly invented technologies, producing an unrivaled musical experience. They feature a significant portion of the design and components developed in our extraordinary flagship Select II DAC.

Designing DACs for more than 25 years has given MSB critical insights in future-ready architecture. California-crafted with in-house design and manufacturing, MSB's discrete ladder core digital engine uses aerospace precision performance, outpacing current audio industry standards.

MSB DACs are the digital source that is ready for any audio formats and input connections that exist today and into the future.

Roon & MQA Renderer

Our Network Renderer adds ultimate convenience for 32bit / 768kHz playback with MQA decoding and a Roon endpoint. It features an ultra-low noise in- house design available as a user-upgradeable module. Your DAC investment is safe for years to come thanks to MSB's modular and upgradeable designs. Please see your MSB dealer about trade up options.

MSB has achieved multiple milestones in digital playback with the introduction of dual Femtosecond clocks, custom in-house digital filters, user-upgradeable modular design, extreme precision balanced ladder DACs, and many more proprietary technologies. Ultra hi-resolution and vanishing noise floors result in delicacy, beauty, and believability that is a revelation in the history of audio reproduction.

2019 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

Contact Vince Galbo to audition MSB products at a dealer near you

(716) 688-3527 | vince@msbtechnology.com

www.msbtechnology.com **Made in California, U.S.A.**

2018 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

built-in phonostage. Its shiny aluminum top plate sits on a matte black body of ABS mixed with fiberglass, which Technics says helps with rigidity. The tonearm is the same S-shape version found in the 1200 Series, with adjustable height and an extra counterweight for use with heavier cartridges and headshells. On the back is a switch to defeat the auto tonearm lift, two sets of RCAs, and a switch to change between the built-in phono preamp and straight line output. Sound is fantastic for this price point, especially through a separate phonostage rather than the internal phono preamp. Overall, an absolute bargain and a pleasure to use. DK, 308

Rega P6 with RB330 tonearm
$1875 ($2245 with pre-mounted Exact cartridge; $2595 with pre-mounted Ania; $2895 with pre-mounted Ania Pro)
The belt-driven unsuspended P6 doesn't deliver the ultimate punch, detail, or transporting emotional thrill of the very finest vinyl playback gear money can buy, but that's hardly the point, or the design goal. The point is that like all the best and longest-lived audio gear, the P6 compels us to play record after record, to revisit music we love, and explore music we have yet to discover. To say that the P6 sets a new standard for Rega 'tables at this price point is not damning with faint praise; it's instead high praise for what Rega has accomplished—and continues to. WG, 313

Pro-Ject RPM 5 Carbon
$1999 (including Sumiko Amethyst cartridge)
The RPM 5 Carbon turntable from Pro-Ject is possibly the first and last turntable you'll ever need. The aesthetics are gorgeous but also functional: the heavy, detached motor and minimalist yet still substantial plinth mean fewer potential vibrations. Pace and timing are spot on, while the surprisingly quiet backgrounds and the sheer depth of soundstaging elevate playback to that next level. Music flows in an incredibly precise and pleasant way, never lagging or falling behind. The RPM 5 will accommodate solid upgrades down the signal path for years to come. It's an easy and obvious step above the rest and highly recommended. DK, 295

$2000–$5000

Clearaudio Concept Black with Satisfy Black Tonearm
$2500
Beautifully proportioned, light but not insubstantial, Concept Black is a model for how a mid-priced, belt-drive turntable should look and perform. Concept Black is made like a fine Swiss mechanical watch; sonically, it offers overall musicality, image focus, transient authenticity, and dynamic conviction. Aided by the optional high-precision Satisfy Black tonearm, mistracking is rendered essentially theoretical, and speed stability is rock solid. Further, image stability is locked down with little to no smearing, even when the 'table is challenged by a tightly packed chorus or complex symphony. NG, 284

MoFi Electronics UltraDeck+
$2799
When Mobile Fidelity decided to create a line of hardware it wisely brought in Allen Perkins of Spiral Groove to design the turntables, and those 'tables deliver a lot of bang for the buck. Setup is simple, especially with the "+" option, which comes with the Japanese-made UltraTracker mm cartridge preinstalled at the Ann Arbor factory. The belt-driven 'table features an isolated AC synchronous motor, a hefty Delrin platter, and a constrained-layer-damped chassis with feet designed by Mike Latvis of HRS. Smoothness, imaging, musicality, pitch stability, and presence emerged as strong themes. The UltraDeck is a smartly conceived and finely honed design that's already earning its place as an instant classic. JM, 284

SOTA Quasar
$2995 ($300 Pyxi phonostage)
Classic style and great sound in an affordable package. The SOTA Quasar is gorgeous—its plinth is made from MDF wrapped in 2¼"-thick American walnut with shiny brass feet and a 1.5"-thick acrylic platter. The feet are brass spikes with little padded cups for extra isolation, and they're brainlessly simple to adjust. As reviewed with the Rega 330 tonearm and the Roadrunner tachometer, speed stability was unparalleled. Rhythm and pacing were excellent, far above the price point, which allowed the full sonic spectrum to bloom. An attractive, fuss-free, and supremely fun turntable that is well worth a listen. DK, 346

Linn Sondek LP12
$3060 (turntable/deck only)
The original high-end turntable, Linn's LP12 conveys the rhythm and pace that are the very foundations of music, and it gets better with age—owners of any vintage LP12 can upgrade to the current model. One of high-end audio's genuine classics. SB, 136

Kuzma Stabi S
$3061 ($5323 with lid and external power supply)
The Stabi S is Kuzma's least expensive turntable, but you wouldn't know it to listen to the thing. Blessed with deep background silences, the Stabi S makes a great complement to the Stogi S tonearm. Not a good choice for rooms where footfalls will be a problem (because it is unsuspended), it is otherwise a fine mid-priced 'table. CM, 159

Pro-Ject RPM 9 Carbon
$3299 ($3799 Including Sumiko Songbird high- or low-output mc cartridge)
The RPM 9 Carbon is Pro-Ject's "tuner" special with significant upgrades over the box-stock RM-9.2. There's a new motor, a new DC-driven power supply that features an improved AC generator for speed stability. Plus, a newly upgraded platter and carbon-wrapped chassis. Sonics were devilishly good. Backgrounds were jet black, and sonics softly tinted to the warmer end of the tonal spectrum. Presto arpeggios were liquid and articulate, and there was an impressive sense of air and lift in the upper octaves with an overarching sense of balance across all other criteria. Overall, a terrific package certain to give a great many lucky owners years of vinyl-spinning thrills. NG, 254

EAT C-Dur
$3799 ($4599 w/Jo No.5 cartridge; $4499 & $5299 in satin black and plum high gloss)
Based on the the top-tier EAT Forte but refashioned in a trimmer format, the C-Dur made analog magic from the first track—articulate, resolved, and brimming with sensitivity. Image dimensionality and layering were superb. In tonal character C-Dur veered ever so slightly to the mellower side of the fence. Detailed and immediate certainly, but not in an overheated or edgy way. Compared with some bigger, pricier rigs, it was a bit more modest in image scale and dynamic explosiveness but fine, nonetheless. The C-Dur is fac-

In A World Full of Vinyl Cleaning Options, There's Two New Inescapable Conclusions.

For more than 50 years, the Spin-Clean Record Washer system has set the standard when it comes to delivering the best-value record cleaning solution. Spin-Clean removes dust, dirt, film, grease and fingerprints, while cleaning both sides of the record at the same time. The Spin-Clean design is simplicity itself – there are no batteries or AC required. Additionally the Spin-Clean fluid is biodegradable. There are no harmful agents, alkalines, or phosphates, and it's totally alcohol-free.

All of which is why the Spin-Clean Record Washer system has been acclaimed by both audiophiles and first-time users alike and cited as the most effective vinyl cleaning option for the money. And now you can also purchase these special Limited Edition Spin-Clean record washer kits that were developed to celebrate the 50th Anniversary reissue of "The Beatles" historic Red (1962-1966) and Blue (1967-1970) albums.

Given the investment in your record collection, isn't it time you take Spin-Clean "for a spin"?

For more information about the Spin-Clean Record Washer system, go to **spinclean.com/store**.

2024 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

© 2024 Spin-Clean International. All rights reserved.

tory outfitted with the fine 10" C-Note tonearm. Dustcover included. NG, 339

SOTA Sapphire Series VI
$3975
The Series VI upgrade of this 30-year-old classic boasts improvements in parts, engineering, machining, fit and finish, and performance—all retrofittable to earlier versions. Its time-proven, four-point hanging suspension is still the ultimate in isolating the 'arm/pickup. For PS, the Sapphire is the least expensive turntable that suggests what "super"-turntables are all about, sacrificing only a bit of resolution and control by comparison. Recommended without serious qualification. PS, 210

Dr. Feickert Volare with Origin Live Silver MK3A tonearm
$3995
Derived from Dr. Feickert's flagship Firebird, Volare is a non-suspension, belt-driven design that has the essentials down pat, possessing a musicality, stability, and solidity that few LP rigs in the $4k ranks can match. Setup is a snap; it operates silently and achieves platter velocity swiftly. Pitch and image stability are rock-solid. It is unwaveringly stable and reproduces soundstage and dimensional cues and ambience in ways that reminded NG of many top-tier rigs. On occasion some acoustic feedback was noted, so a good isolation base is recommended. Volare includes a premium, heavy, well-balanced aluminum platter coupled with a high-torque motor. Fit and finish are superb. NG, 301

Pear Audio Little John with Coronet 2 tonearm
$3995 ($2995 w/Coronet 1 tonearm)
This combination, close to the entry-level of the Pear Audio line of turntables and tonearms, owes design principles to the late vinyl guru Tom Fletcher, notably in the use of a low-torque motor (to prevent vibrations from reaching the stylus) that requires manually bringing the platter up to speed. Paul Seydor found the sound warm without being mushy; rounded and dimensional without being soft or fuzzy; smooth, even sweet, yet not lacking in profile or enough stringency if the source calls for it; natural, easeful, unforced, and musical against a background of black velvet (record surfaces permitting). PS, 295

Technics SL-1200G-S
$4299
This turntable, which shares the historic name and appearance of the long-running SL-1200 series but is in fact a new design, offers performance at the very highest level. Its silence and speed stability are competitive with any turntable available and are far superior to most, even very high-priced ones. The turntable's sound is rock-solid, very pure, highly resolved, and quite lively in the positive sense. REG, 274

EAT C-Sharp
$4499
The C-Sharp produced appealing sound that had rhythmic drive and made nearly everything reviewer Andre Jennings spun fun to listen to. Although the EAT lacked the ultimate resolution and neutrality of pricier analog front ends, AJ still found its "sins" of omission more than acceptable. Indeed, he found himself spending more time listening to complete albums during the review period than what he'd originally allocated for the evaluation. AJ, 254

Clearaudio Concept AiR Active with Satisfy Carbon Fiber and Concept MC
$4600 (Smart Power 12V option, $1200)
The Concept Active redefines what it means to be an affordable *and* accessible high-performance turntable in the here and now. The Concept Active includes a tonearm and cartridge, of course. But there's also a top-notch built-in phonostage and headphone output with volume control. While the Concept Active performed terrifically in a full system, it's hard to downplay the musicality of listening through a good set of headphones fed directly from the Concept Active. What was unexpected was how little resolution the "entry-level" Concept Active gave up in comparison to far more elite rigs. Adding the optional Smart Power 12V—a battery-based DC power supply—further improved image focus and transient clarity. Overall, a rarity in the high end—a triumph of performance, pricing, and packaging. NG, 317

Acoustic Signature Maximus Neo
$4995 (TA-1000 tonearm, $2495; MCX3 cart, $1695)
The Maximus is the entry-level turntable in the Neo line. It's a two-speed, belt-drive design that benefits from the technology intrinsic to its much more expensive family members. Each turntable in the Neo line is outfitted with an individualized version of the Dura Turn Diamond® bearing, which is not only super-rigid for low noise but also exceptionally rugged with a long service life. The spindle is made of hardened stainless steel that is precision ground and then plasma coated to yield a diamond-like surface. Throw in a high-end replacement for the stock leather mat and a good record clamp such as the Acoustic Signature's Grip Mk3, and you end up with a superbly rigid and well-damped vinyl playback platform that sounds far superior to any entry-level table DO has auditioned over the years. DO, 330

Pro-Ject Xtension 10
$4999 ($5999 with Sumiko Starling cartridge)
Long known for affordable, high-value turntables, Pro-Ject has recently entered the market for more up-scale models. And its Xtension 10 is a worthy contender. The design features a mass-loaded, magnetically floated subchassis, a 3"-tall, 12.6 lbs. vinyl/alloy platter, and the 10cc Evolution tonearm. What makes the ensemble special is its ability to get at the heart of the music, consistently providing not only a high level of musical satisfaction but doing so in a way that delivers a powerful emotional wallop. WG, 242

$5000–$10,000

Dr. Feickert Woodpecker
$5295
Incorporating a host of purposeful updates, the gorgeous-looking Woodpecker proves itself capable of performance appropriate to its good design execution. While having a slightly higher noise floor than much more expensively executed designs, the Woodpecker is a very capable platform for vinyl playback that should serve its owner far into the future. AJ, 244

Luxman PD-151 MKII
$5695 ($6490 with dustcover)
The PD-151's almost Spartan appearance belies its technical and engineering sophisti-

There's life upside-down.

SCHIIT.COM

cation. Stability of speed and accuracy of pitch are addressed by a combination of a proprietary sine wave/pulse-width-modulation power supply, high-torque DC brushless motor, and a PID feedback loop for control over rapid speed fluctuations. Some turntables have an immediately recognizable sound of their own, others don't or at least have much less so. This Luxman is solidly in latter camp. The PD-151's dynamic reproduction is principally limited by the quality of vinyl you place on the platter and the quality of recording pressed into that vinyl, and the same goes for detail. Reviewer PS concluded "I experienced more sheer joy with the PD-151 than I've had reviewing a turntable in I can't remember when." PS, 322

Rega Planar 10
$6345 ($7895 with pre-mounted Apheta 3 cartridge; $10,995 with pre-mounted Aphelion 2 cartridge)
The latest in a near-legendary line of turntables, the top-of-line Rega Planar 10 exemplifies Rega founder Roy Gandy's latest design thinking. With its stiff and light plinth, ceramic platter, and Apheta 3 cartridge mounted in Rega's best arm, the Planar 10 pulls a truly amazing amount of detail out of LPs, all the while remaining extraordinarily quiet. The presentation is tonally neutral with lifelike weight, body, and presence. Lower octaves are deep, tight, and fully defined while resolution, articulation, pitch accuracy, and timbre are superb. When purchased with the pre-mounted cartridge, the Planar 10 can literally be set up and ready to go in minutes. An external power supply provides rock-solid speed stability and makes changing speeds a snap. Simple, straightforward, and exceptional. SSc, 317

Clearaudio Performance DC Wood AiR with Tracer Tonearm
$7000
The Performance DC Wood turntable's evenhandedness and consistency (of speed, etc.) capably conveyed complex layering of instruments and/or vocals, helping to preserve their true characteristic tonality for a more realistic and compelling presentation. Better still, this presentation benefitted any type of music, making the Performance DC Wood/Tracer tonearm (with optional Stradivari V2 cartridge) an excellent choice for multi-genre vinyl lovers, who (like JM) have all-over-the-map musical tastes. If you have the means, this turntable/tonearm should be on your short list. JM, 297

Acoustic Signature Tornado Neo
$7995
Acoustic Signature implemented across-the-board improvements to its entire turntable lineup: an accumulation of at least 25 years of industry experience, along with the present-day implementation of its innovations in vibration control, platter bearing design, and constrained-layer damping. With these updates, the mostly all-metal Tornado Neo provides a stable platform for multiple cartridges and tonearms to easily show their individual differences and performance characteristics. With already solid construction and the Neo advancements, the Tornado provides exceptional performance, along with countless hours of musical enjoyment. AJ, 326

Helius Alexia with Omega tonearm
$8790
The Helius Alexia turntable and Omega tonearm represent a combination of traditional and genuinely innovative thinking. A two-speed (33/45) belt-drive, the Alexia features a novel suspension that is very compliant in the vertical dimension, completely fixed in the lateral, while an optical sensor below the platter results in unusually effective speed accuracy and constancy. The Omega's bearing is a uniquely "tetrahedral" configuration that offers "a captured design and minimal friction." Reviewer PS was impressed by the setup's stability of pitch, wide dynamic window, and excellent tracking of inner grooves. PS, 311

Clearaudio Ovation with 24V Professional Power linear power supply
$9500 ($12,000 w/Tracer tonearm)
Continuing the trend of bundling together even more sophisticated turntables, 'arms, and cartridges into fine-sounding but relatively hassle-free combinations, Clearaudio recently released what may be the most ambitious such package yet. With the Tracer carbon-fiber tonearm and Talisman v2.1 Gold cartridge, the Ovation is a terrific-sounding combo. It is very well balanced, with excellent detail that emerges from silent backgrounds, exceptional pitch stability, and sweet extended highs—if not the powerhouse bottom-end found in the highest-end models. WG, 216

Pear Audio Blue Kid Thomas
$9995 (w/Cornet 2 tonearm and external power supply)
Based on the pedigree and designs of the late Tom Fletcher (of Nottingham Analogue fame), the Pear Audio Blue Kid Thomas is an advancement over Fletcher's older products. Pear Audio's goal with the Kid Thomas is "sonic harmony." In this case, every aspect of the Kid Thomas' design was tested, down to the smallest parts, to optimize performance. The act of merging art and craftsmanship with measurements and science allows this turntable package to become a subjectively quiet playback system that can reproduce music in a way that is like more expensive turntable systems. AJ, 263

$10,000 and above

SOTA Cosmos Eclipse
$10,675 ($9350 w/o vacuum)
Compared with the open-chassis, suspensionless designs of contemporary models, the Cosmos Eclipse smacks of a bygone era. Nonetheless, NG found its attributes indispensable—progressive vacuum holddown, excellent acoustic-mechanical isolation, a dampened sub-chassis, and what amounts to a suspended seismic platform that can suffer a San Andreas episode without a skip. Also available as an upgrade for current Cosmos owners, the Eclipse package incorporates SOTA's latest innovations and can include a three-phase motor, a maglev platter, a new electronics package with speed control from Phoenix Engineering, plus various fine-tuning twists and tweaks. The performance gains are nothing short of stunning. A true classic reborn. NG, 316

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS CELEBRATES **33 YEARS** OF THE BEST ANALOG GEAR

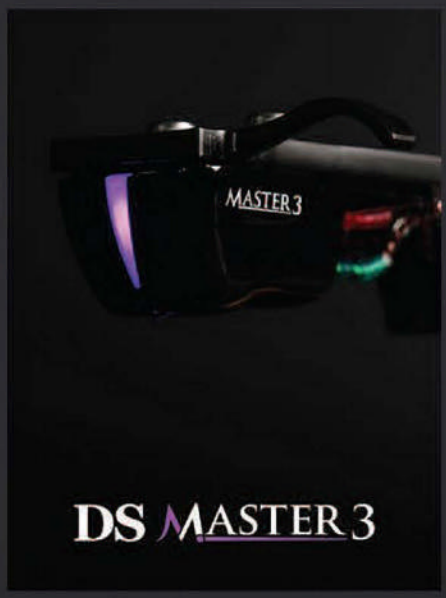
ANALOG REVOLUTION

Optical Phono Cartridge Selection

GRAND MASTER EX

Cartridge of the Year - 2023
Technological Breakthrough - 2021

GRAND MASTER



DS MASTER 3

DS W3

Cartridge of the Year - 2022

DS 003

DS E1

MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS 33

EST. 1991 - OAKLAND, CA

MUSICALSURROUNDINGS.COM | 510.547.5006

DS Audio

Creating the Future of Analog Music

Thorens TD-124 DD
$11,999
This integrated turntable is a fully updated and upgraded version of the classic TD 124 (1957–65), an idler-driven design known for its flow, forward motion, drive, and continuity. Eschewing the idler in favor of a very sophisticated new direct-drive motor, the 124 DD fully lives up to its heritage while exhibiting a bold, exciting presentation allied to a high degree of sonic neutrality, without slighting finesse, subtlety, nuance, and detail. Ergonomically, it lays claim to being the most intelligently realized and thought-through record-playing setup PS has ever used, while its retro styling is irresistible (to PS, anyhow). Although it enters a very competitive retail sector of the integrated turntable market that includes similarly priced models from several other manufacturers, its overall performance is second to none of them and is fully competitive with others costing multiples of its retail price. PS, 337

Basis Bravo
$13,700 ($16,000 with Vector 4 tonearm)
The Bravo is the first Basis model designed by someone other than late founder A.J. Conti, whose decades of intense R&D played a huge role in the success of Basis' most affordable rig. The main bearing, platter, motor, and belt are identical to those found in the model 2200. What largely differentiates the Bravo is that it replaces Basis' Resonance Annihilator suspension with a fixed subchassis fitted with solid feet and rubber isolators. The Bravo is also smaller and simpler to set up, with either a blue, red, or black color plate beneath the acyclic plinth. Though it lacks a VTA micrometer and has a few other differences, the supplied Vector 'arm is sonically nearly undistinguishable from the Vector 4. Though the Bravo/Vector doesn't take you as far as other Basis models, it triumphs by bringing the company's purity of sound and connection to master-tapes to a wider audience of music lovers. WG, 341

Clearaudio Innovation Wood with 24V Professional Power linear power supply
$14,000
The dual-plinthed Innovation Wood combines some stunning innovations with Clearaudio's ceramic/magnetic bearing (CMB) technology and lightweight yet extremely dense Panzerholz to damp resonances. It uses a massive stainless-steel subplatter, which, when coupled with a DC motor with optical speed control, results in superb speed accuracy. JH has not heard any belt-driven 'table best the Innovation Wood in this critical area. Solo instruments and voices have such rock-solid pitch stability that you'll swear you are listening to a direct-drive 'table without the motor noise. JH, 204

SME Model 12 MK2 with 309 Tonearm
$14,700
Replacing SME's previous entry-level Model 10A, which also came with the 309 tonearm, the Model 12 MK2 represents a substantial leap in performance over what was already an impressive ensemble. It evinces the typical SME house "sound": all but peerless neutrality, deep background blackness, and dynamic range second to none. A powerful new motor effectively banishes concerns over speed accuracy, stability, constancy, and timing, while its proprietary mat/clamping arrangement rivals vacuum hold-down. Not only is the 12/309's sonic performance astonishingly close to that of the company's flagship models, but it also receives the same standard-setting quality of build, parts, fit, and finish. The 12 MK2 may be the welterweight in the company's lineup, but it can certainly hold its own in the ring with the big boys. PS, 306

Brinkmann Audio Spyder
$14,990 ($19,990 package includes 10.5 tonearm, $20,290 with 12.1 tonearm)
Eschewing an enclosed plinth in favor of an open chassis, the Spyder mounts the platter assembly's base on a cylindrical pillar. Additional cylindrical pillars support up to four tonearms as well as the outboard motor. The Spyder's sound is transparent, dynamic, low in perceived distortion, with a high degree of neutrality. It exhibits a clarity without that etched quality that is sometimes mistaken for clarity or transparency or resolution. The Spyder is also well isolated from external disturbance, even when the music gets big, deep, and loud. Operationally this setup was a joy to use, its fit and finish of a caliber that spells "G-E-R-M-A-N" in caps. In sum, here's a vinyl player of all-around excellence that should provide years of performance both pleasurable and trouble-free. PS, 269

Brinkmann Audio Taurus
$16,990 ($22,290 package includes 10.5 tonearm; $22,590 package includes 12.1 tonearm)
Reviewer AM has had some experience with other big, fancy, expensive turntables. Can he definitively tell you that any of them is better than the Taurus? No, he cannot. Can he say that the Taurus is the best turntable you can buy at any price? Come on. You know the answer to that. Of course, he can't. But the direct-drive Brinkmann manages to combine love and appreciation in a way that few can, and it's a clear step above the finest $10k–$20k 'tables he's heard, fully justifying its status as a reference. It's one of the few products he's reviewed about which he has no reservations. AM, 315

AMG Viella Standard
$17,500 without wood skirt ($19,000 with cherry skirt, or black lacquer skirt; includes AMG12J2 tonearm, a $4800 value)
The beautifully machined Analog Manufaktur Germany Viella Standard is that relative rarity—a truly first-rate and original audio component that, while by no means cheap, is still within the financial reach of folks who aren't made of money. The V12 may not (in fact, it does not) give you everything that a $100k+ Walker or Acoustic Signature Invictus gives you, but what it does supply on select recordings—the extended sense that you are in the actual presence of real performers in a real space—is more than enough to justify the rave review JV gave it. A great turntable. JV, 226

Pear Audio Blue Odar
$18,000 (with Cornet 3 12" tonearm)
The Odar is the latest and most fully evolved version of the turntable ideas involved in previous Pear Blue designs, involving a heavy platter belt-driven by a very low-torque motor (you need to start the platter by hand), and very careful control of resonant energy. The sound is what REG regards as ideal—very silent in background with unconstrained perceived dynamics, very solid, detailed but without any hint of exaggeration by resonances in the upper frequencies or mo-

The Baetis Audio 4-Series Digital Source

"The Baetis Audio Reference 4 Mingo demonstrated the ability to be more "alive," more real, and more natural than any digital component should have a right to be. It is the only streamer to have relegated to obscurity the best of the best CD players, which a short time ago I did not believe possible."

Kermit E. Heartsong, Audio Key Reviews
Reference 4 Mingo review

"I have never heard Maria Callas sing Carmen like this. Move on Up by Delvon Lamarr felt like he was live in my music room playing his Hammond B-3. For the first time, I can hear a significant difference between every type of violin and cello being played. This purity of tones pulls you into every song."

Steve F, MA, Reference 4 Mingo owner

"The Baetis Audio Revolution X4 easily wins our Golden Key Note Award for exceptional musicality, high fidelity, engagement, and superb naturalness that few other streamers, at any price, have been able to match"

Kermit E. Heartsong, Audio Key Reviews
Revolution X4 review

2023 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

The Baetis Audio 4-Series: *Prodigy 4, Revolution 4, Reference 4 and Reference 4 Mingo Edition*

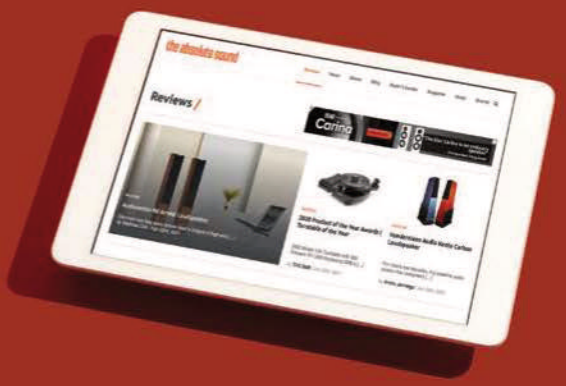
Streamers, Servers, Roon Cores and Roon Endpoints: All custom-made and hand-built in Canada
Experience the "live sound" from our best ever systems

roon

www.baetisaudio.com

βaetis Audio
Fidelity starts at the source

the absolute sound.com



New mobile-friendly design
Browse thousands of equipment reviews
Discover new audiophile quality music
Get web exclusive content including "first look" reviews

Another Great usedcable.com

Plug into our 30 years of high-end cable expertise

- 1 Year Warranty
- 30 Day No Hassle Exchange
- Free Shipping over $50
- Free System Consultation

usedcable.com **800-328-9973**
usedcable@usedcable.com

UsedCable.com is a trusted Cable Company joint

tor-induced platter vibrations. Forget any misguided idea sometimes expressed that this type of sound is too subdued. What it actually is is correct—and superbly musical in the best sense. A turntable at the outer limits of the possible, without a stratospheric price. (Electronic external power supply with choice of 33 or 45 rpm, but no fine speed adjustment.) REG, 328

Technics SL-1000R
$19,999
Technics, long the dominant manufacturer of direct-drive turntables, has now returned to its original area of renown with the SL-1000R. And it's a beauty. Simple in design but sophisticated in execution, the SL-1000R provides the virtues of direct-drive without its former drawbacks. There is no discernible noise transmitted from the motor to the platter. Instead, the SL-1000R has remarkable fidelity on transients, stopping and starting musical passages on a dime. This precision allows vocals, not to mention acoustic instruments, to come through with excellent tonal accuracy. This simple and elegant turntable makes a strong case for the virtues of direct drive. JHb, 306

J.Sikora Standard Max
$21,250
A turntable that is as visually appealing as it is sonically. Few, if any, 'tables in this price range can boast this level of precision machining, which extends to everything from the platter to the weighty damping puck. The result is superlative sound. With the proprietary Sikora tonearm, the 'table delivers effortless and snappy vinyl playback. It also produces a soundstage and bass that are particularly winning on orchestral pieces. Its wealth of impressive attributes mean that the Standard Max cannot be deemed anything other than a top contender. JHb, 324

TW Acustic Raven AC-3
$22,000
The three-motor Raven AC-3 is an unsuspended 'table of relatively low mass made from very high-quality materials, including spectacular bits of copper. Every part of this black beauty has been machined to the highest possible tolerances; every aspect of its design tested and retested by measurement and by ear. The result of all this labor and ingenuity is a 'table that reproduces the duration of notes—from starting transient through lingering decay—more completely than any other. JV, 180

Kuzma Stabi M
$24,380
Built like a battleship—black on black in black, all metal in a baked-on matte finish—the Kuzma's Stabi M turntable looks strictly industrial. Brutally heavy, thick slabs of aluminum form the outer and inner chassis, with just enough elasticity between to allow for judicious damping without compromising rigidity. The sound is superbly neutral, with very quiet backgrounds, and like all large heavy turntables in PS' experience it soundstages with exceptional stability and solidity. There's also a difficult-to-define sense of liveliness about the sonics that is addictive. All in all, a superior platform for your vinyl treasures. PS, 248

JR Transrotor Orion Reference FMD
$24,575
A beautiful piece of audio art designed around a Free Magnetic Drive system that is as quiet as they come, the Orion Reference FMD does an admirable job of isolating the platter from any anomalies generated by the drive system. The sonic result provides a very low noise platform that allows music to erupt from the darkest of backgrounds. AJ, 253

Basis Audio 2200 Signature with Vector 4 Tonearm
$25,500 (with Calibrator Base, Isolation system, reflex clamp; turntable only $11,000)
Designed by A.J. Conti, the 2200/Vector 4 setup redefines for PS what is possible in vinyl playback. In every area and aspect of performance, this Basis combination outperforms all other turntable/'arm setups (this includes several costing multiples its price). Design, engineering, and precision in machining approach a standard of perfection surpassed by none and equaled by virtually none. WG, in his follow-up report after purchasing a 2200/Vector 4, wrote "I must report that never in my almost four decades as an audiophile have I lived with a record player like this one—so across-the-board uncolored, transparent, coherent, and seemingly responsive to whatever frequency and dynamic range, ambient, tonal, space, air, and other microscopic information may be pressed into vinyl grooves." (PS, 180, WG, 317)

Kronos Sparta
$26,000
This ingenious turntable with counter-rotating platters is Kronos Audio's way of offering the lion's share of the sonic advantage that its more-expensive PRO brings to the party at a more cost-effective price. Reviewer GW was supremely impressed, saying that the implementation of the dual-platter, contra-rotational concept is the single most significant development in turntable design in decades. With the Sparta, records he'd been listening to for decades were given new dimension, increased focus, enhanced clarity, and more credible tonality. He bought the review sample. GW, 259

Basis Audio 2800 Signature
$32,000 (includes vacuum system)
Built to an amazing degree of mechanical precision, the Basis 2800 Signature is nothing short of revelatory in its ability to seemingly disappear from the playback chain. This 'table imposes no discernable colorations on the music, allowing a deeper and more immediate connection with your LPs. RH, 172

SME Model 20 MK2
$32,900 (includes Series V tonearm)
This improvement upon the middle model in SME's lineup now brings it so close to the flagship 30/3 that it's doubtful their performances can be reliably distinguished on even the highest-resolution setups. Stability, control, and neutrality triangulate the virtues of this and every other SME setup, with an extraordinary impression of foundation plus a deep, deep background blackness that very few competitors can approach, let alone surpass. Built like all SMEs to the highest standards, this setup will last a lifetime. PS, 216

TechDAS Air Force Three Premium S
$44,500
As the "Three" suggests, this 'table is the third progeny of TechDAS, with the mighty Air Force One, reviewed by Paul Seydor in Issue 254, at the head of the line, both in sonics and price. The belt-drive Air Force Three Premium is a different customer. It offers a tremendous amount in a small package, ranging from vacuum hold-down to an air-bearing platter. It was evident from the very first needle drop that the Air Force Three Premium possesses a

A Small Miracle
From PS Audio
aspen FR10 Loudspeaker
PS AUDIO

remarkably continuous sound. This makes for an extremely non-fatiguing presentation, one that will have you pulling out album after album, not in a search for the last detail contained in the grooves but for the lovely—reviewer JHb called it "holistic"—sound. JHb, 280

TW Acustic Black Knight with TW Raven 10.5 Tonearm
$48,000 ($42,500 turntable only)
Thomas Woschnick's massive, beautifully designed and finished, statement turntable with outboard motor and separate power supply delivers all the ravishing timbral beauty of TW's less-expensive AC-3, while adding a transient liveliness, rhythmic pace, and resolution of low-level detail that make for a more complete and realistic sonic presentation. Equipped with Woschnick's own 10.5 'arm ($5500), the Black Knight competes at or near the same exalted level as the Acoustic Signature Invictus and the still superb Walker Black Diamond Mk V. JV, 274

SME Model 30 MK2
$49,900 (includes Series V tonearm)
Mounted with the SME Series V 'arm, the 30/2 impressed PS with its tonal neutrality, pitch accuracy, resolution, transparency, rhythmic grip, ambience, low coloration, and soundstaging. He concluded that its specialness "lies in three related areas of sonic performance: background silence, dynamics, and that elusive impression of liveliness that persuades you the music has come alive in your living room." PS, 154

Acoustic Signature Ascona MKII NEO
$49,995
This high-tech, high-mass turntable from German engineer Gunther Frohnhoefer took 15 years to bring to fruition. Built like a Magico loudspeaker of damped, satin-finished, CNC-milled aircraft aluminum (with brass "silencers" seamlessly fitted into holes drilled and line-bored into its massive platter), the near-200-pound Ascona effortlessly reproduces the lowest-level timbres, textures, and spatial cues, as well as the most thunderous dynamics, uniting the toe-tapping "pace" of a lighter 'table with the authority of a heavyweight. JV, 221 (Neo version not yet reviewed)

Clearaudio Master Innovation with 24V Professional Power linear power supply
$62,000 ($32,000 table only)
The key to great LP playback is lower noise (which equals higher fidelity). The trouble is that mechanical resonances transmitted from turntable, motor, and tonearm tend to fight against this goal, adding distortion rather than subtracting it. Not so with the Clearaudio's Master Innovation turntable equipped with the extremely low-mass, near-vestigial, carbon-fiber, linear-tracking TT-1MI tonearm. This brilliant Peter Suchy design not only effectively isolates the drive system from the platter (the main platter "floats" on a magnetic field above the drive platter, eliminating any points of physical contact—and thus any transmission of friction and noise); it also eliminates the inevitable tracking/tracing error of pivoted 'arms via Suchy's equally brilliantly designed linear-tracking tonearm. An engineering masterpiece, one of JV's references, and TAS's 2019 Turntable of the Year. JV, 301

Esoteric Grandioso T1
$72,500 ($80k with TA 9Dtonearm; $27,000 G1X Master Clock)
Esoteric's exotic-turntable market debut surprised even those expecting a "grandioso" entrance from a company known best for its high-performance digital and electronic products. The unique, contact-free, high-torque MagneDrive System produces exceptional speed consistency, accuracy, and background quiet. It's but one feature contributing to this high-mass turntable's smooth, effortless, stand-out sonic performance. Another is the inverted bearing that places the 42-pound, partially levitated aluminum platter's center of gravity well below the rotational axis and reduces to nine pounds the bearing/thrust pad contact weight, which greatly lowers friction and noise. Other features include a vibration-reducing, triple-layer, aluminum-and-wood chassis and a meticulously realized suspension system. Adding the optional 10MHz G1X Master Clock takes rotational accuracy and sonic performance to a higher level. Three-arm capability and seductive looks and sound help make the Grandioso T1 an instant classic. MF, 341

SME 60
$74,900
A worthy successor to the still-in-production, former "flagship" SME 30 (recently upgraded to Mk2), the larger, moderately higher-mass Model 60 features new adjustable, de-coupled feet, and now hidden within the four support columns, a new, more sophisticated vertical and lateral isolation/damping O-ring suspension system. The biggest news though is the new Series VA 'arm exclusive to the Model 60, CNC-machined from an advanced, acoustically inert polymer resin. The new 'arm, suspension and a few other design enhancements work together to produce SME's most sophisticated sounding, lowest coloration turntable yet. Michael Fremer, 333

Basis Audio Inspiration
$115,000 ($130,000 with Super Platter)
Although it looks like Basis' 2800 Signature, the Inspiration has more in common with the Basis Work of Art. Sonically, it is revelatory, playing in an entirely different league than the 2800. It is astonishingly quiet, not just in an absence of background noise, but also in stripping a layer of grunge from instrumental timbres. It also seems to allow instrumental decays to hang in space longer, such is its low-level resolving power. When paired with the Basis SuperArm 9, the Inspiration is stunning. RH, 220

Acoustic Signature Invictus Jr. Neo
$122,995
A couple of years ago, Acoustic Signature introduced a behemoth turntable—the ultra-wide, ultra-deep, ultra-heavy, ultra-expensive, original Invictus. Quieter and more imperturbable than any analog front end JV had heard up until then, the Invictus sounded uncannily like a tape player. It was just smoother and, to use an HP phrase, more continuous than the competition in every sonic respect. Comes now a far smaller, more affordable, and, interestingly, more advanced version of the Invictus—the Invictus, Jr. Designed over the last two years (the original was conceived better than six years ago), the Junior

SRX

World's reference power cable.

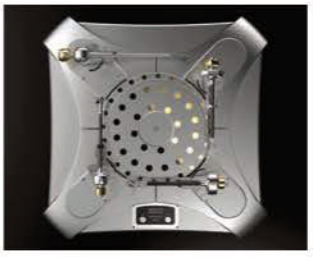
SYNERGISTIC RESEARCH

NEVER COMPROMISE • SYNERGISTICRESEARCH.COM

takes technological and sonic advantage of all that Acoustic Signature has learned in about half a decade. The result is in certain ways an even better record player (harder-hitting, higher resolution) than the Senior for a lot less dough. TAS' 2019 Turntable of the Year. JV, 297 (Neo version not yet reviewed)

TechDAS Air Force One Premium
$155,000/$172,000 w/ titanium platter
This turntable from the distinguished Asian veteran-designer Hideaki Nishikawa is an all-out attempt to exceed every aspect and parameter of turntable performance. An air bearing for the platter, air suction for the vacuum hold-down, and air bladders for the suspension system triangulate the nucleus of the AF One Premium, the first to combine them in a single design. The sonic results are a background blackness and consequent dynamic range the like of which reviewer PS never experienced with vinyl. PS, 254

Basis Audio A.J. Conti Transcendence with SuperArm 12.5
$159,000
The Transcendence is designer A.J. Conti's radical rethinking of the turntable after more than 30 years of creating some of the world's best record players. An all-out design, the Transcendence is the result of Conti's heroic attempt to make LPs sound like mastertape—his reference in creating the Transcendence. In a design departure from previous Basis 'tables, the Transcendence is built from stainless-steel rather than acrylic, and the suspension system is entirely new. Sonically, the Transcendence lives up to its name; this turntable has achieved some kind of breakthrough in LP reproduction, rendering the sound of records with a previously unimaginable body, solidity, dynamics, and texture that indeed sound like tape, not vinyl. RH's reference, and TAS' Overall Product of the Year for 2019. RH, 295



Acoustic Signature Invictus Neo
$199,995
This elaborately re-designed, handsomely styled chunk of anodized aluminum remains the most massive turntable JV has heard or tested. With six motors (controlled by an outboard power supply), a 37-pound platter, and a 260-pound CLD chassis, it's a beast. When paired with Acoustic Signature's superb new TA-9000 Neo tonearm ($27,995), it is also the best record player JV has ever heard—the virtual embodiment of sonic neutrality and completeness. Nothing engraved in vinyl escapes it (or is altered by it). This is one of those game-changers that you have to hear to fully appreciate—a truly great piece of high-fidelity engineering. JV, 339

Oswalds Mill Audio K3 with Schroeder Tonearm
$363,000
Direct drive turntables have long been plagued by noise transmitted from the motor to the platter. The K3, a *tour de force* of engineering based on years of advanced research, has effectively abolished that nettlesome problem, offering jet black backgrounds coupled to awesome dynamics. Transient accuracy is not second to none, but in another league entirely. Voices stop and start with a seamless lucidity that comes about as close to the real thing as possible. The absence of smearing or bloat also allows complex orchestral passages to emerge with thunderous finality. The K3 is not a good turntable; it's a great one. JH, 346

TechDAS Air Force Zero
$500,000 ($550,000 w/ Tungsten top platter)
The Air Force Zero, a 700-pound+ beast devoted to spinning a vinyl platter as unobtrusively as possible, is an immensely impressive creation, a tribute to the ingenuity and seriousness of purpose of its legendary designer, Hideaki Nishikawa. The massive air-bearing platter, composed of multiple layers of stainless steel, gun metal, and tungsten, makes the LP itself look positively diminutive. But the sound that this gorgeous belt-drive 'table produces is something altogether different. It can ramp up to dynamic fortissimos that will shake a room, whether the music is a Mahler symphony or a Led Zeppelin tune. But perhaps the most impressive aspect of the Zero is its refinement. There is a sense of ease to the proceedings, a blissfulness that transports it into a truly lofty realm that perhaps no other competitor can quite match. JHb, 312

TONEARMS

Under $2000

Origin Live Encounter Mk III
$1650
In the Encounter, PS' reference Ortofon Windfeld displayed its peerless neutrality and near-peerless tracking, with outstanding bass and a rich and involving midrange. Highs, though smooth and extended, evinced a very subtle lack of detail or focus. The Encounter also allowed the Dynavector Karat Mk III to strut its stuff with virtually no cramping of its high-kicking style. It says volumes for the excellence of this 'arm that it could put two such different pickups through their paces so even-handedly. PS, 210

Kuzma Stogi S
$1915 (w/Cardas copper wire)
The Stogi S is a hydraulically damped unipivot with a simple string-and-weight anti-skating mechanism, dual underslung counterweights, and provisions for making both coarse and fine azimuth adjustments. In our reviewer's system, this 'arm enabled a Shelter 90X cartridge to produce almost shockingly three-dimensional sound with rock-solid bass. CM, 159

$2000 and above

Acoustic Signature TA-2000 Neo
$3695
This 9" tonearm (a 12" version is also available) is a step up from Acoustic Signature's excellent TA-1000 Neo recommended elsewhere in these Editors' Choice Awards. It features a dual-layer carbon armtube with almost frictionless precision ball bearings and an internal high-quality wiring by Mogami. When mounted on Acoustic Signature's Tornado Neo turntable, the combination produced excellent soundstaging and instrumental clarity. With a slightly forward presentation, the TA-2000 Neo projected excellent clarity and dynamic agility. Rhythmic pacing was similarly superb. AJ, 326

Helius Designs Omega Silver Ruby
$5225, 10"; $5295, 12"
Designer Geoffrey Owen has significantly advanced his tetrahedral design to produce a captured-ruby-bearing 'arm with extremely low absolute friction and single-point contact on all surfaces. This dynamically balanced 'arm with non-coincident bearings

The World's Most Powerful, Affordable, Dual-Sided LP Vacuum Cleaning Machine

Meet the Model X – a groundbreaking addition to the **Record Doctor** vacuum cleaner family. Compact and efficient, the X's dual-sided cleaning operation ensures spotless LPs in under a minute. Outclassing expensive rivals, it touts a direct-drive, high-torque motor and full-size clamp for label protection.

Elevate your vinyl collection with this incredible machine, priced at **under $600.**

Available in two finishes.

GLOSS BLACK

CARBON-FIBER VINYL

PANGEA AUDIO
AN AMERICAN COMPANY

For more information, email **sales@pangeaaudio.com** or call **(866) 984-0677**

provides a very stable mechanical platform for a wide range of cartridges without adding its own coloration. JH, 204

Tri-Planar Mk VII-U2 Classic
$7500
This classic example of great 'arm design is also in an SE version ($8850) and with a 12" carbon fiber arm wand ($11,500). If earlier models were characterized by tremendous solidity, focus, dynamic agility, bottom-end reach, overall neutrality, and transparency to the source, then the beautifully built Classic is quite simply all that multiplied. WG, 191

Graham Phantom III
$7900, 9"; $8300, 10"; $8800, 12"
The Graham Phantom III is a "stable" unipivot design that is an advancement over earlier models, using knowledge gained from the Phantom Elite. The patented Magneglide magnetic stabilization bearing interface serves to give the Phantom its stable feeling when playing records. The 'arm is available with two mounting options (custom Graham or SME-type) and in three armwand lengths, which gives the end-user a variety of configuration options. The baseline performance of the Phantom III is outstanding. With such a tonearm, connected cartridges are more likely to show their individual characters more clearly—and recorded music is more likely to sound its best. AJ, 291

Basis Audio Vector 4
$8200 ($9500 w/VTA micrometer)
Basis Audio's A.J. Conti has solved a fundamental problem with unipivot tonearms—dynamic azimuth error. Rather than allowing the 'arm to "roll" when the cartridge encounters record warp, the Vector maintains perfect azimuth alignment via Conti's simple yet ingenious design. The result is an extremely neutral-sounding 'arm that RH has yet to hear mistrack on any LP. RH, 172 and 220

Kuzma 4P
$9260 ($10,825, bi-wire w/ RCA box)
This ingeniously designed eleven-inch tonearm from Frank Kuzma uses a unique four-point bearing (two points for vertical movement, two for horizontal). When properly set up (as with all Kuzma designs every adjustment is easily made, although the supplied tonearm set-up jig needs fixing), it is among the highest-resolution, most neutral, most "not-there" pivoted tonearms JV has auditioned, with what appears to be less bearing chatter than any 'arm this side of the straight-line-tracking air-bearing Walker Black Diamond—and for a lot less dough. JV, 221; PS, 248

Graham Phantom Elite
$13,750 9"; $14,250 10"; $14,750 12" (w/extra counterweights)
Although the basic design principles, thinking, and features of Bob Graham's classic Phantom unipivot tonearm remain unchanged, the Elite represents a substantial upgrade from previous iterations, with improvements in materials and implementation, constrained-layer damping in the pivot assembly, a new high-density, non-magnetic tungsten insert for zero-tolerance bearing-contact and high spurious-energy absorption. No other 'arm known to PS can be more accurately and repeatably adjusted to extract optimal performance from any suitable pickup. Partner it with the Air Force 1 turntable, and you get a record-playing system that is unlikely to be surpassed. PS, 254

KL Audio KD-ARM-AP-12
$15,000
Combining the attributes of a pivoted tonearm with a traditional linear-tracking tonearm, Klaudio has created a uniquely functional pivoted/linear-tracking KD-ARM. The 'arm's tangency is truly that of a traditional linear tracker; yet it provides the mounting convenience of a pivoted 'arm and its sometimes-improved bass performance. This combination, when set up properly, yields excellent sound from top to bottom. With smooth operation, a host of expected adjustments (VTA/SRA, VTF, azimuth, and linear tracking zero-overhang calibration), smooth handling and operation, along with the ability to quickly switch cartridges via a removable headshell, the KD-ARM combines user flexibility with sonic satisfaction. AJ, 328

Kuzma Safir
$22,000
Kuzma's most costly pivoted arm, featuring a "lab-grown" sapphire arm tube, is by far designer Franc Kuzma's best sounding. Its resonance-free bottom-octave performance puts it, regardless of price, well above most competition. Once you hear it, the differences will be clear between solid, deep bass emanating from the grooves and arm-tube-resonance-added "bass." The unique "4 Point" bearing system—four hardened steel points sitting in jeweled cups— resulting in very low friction, zero "play," and little or no bearing "chatter"—is enhanced here by a high-mass solid aluminum and brass block structure supporting the points and sapphire tube. Unlike other Kuzma 4 Points, the Safir's headshell is not removeable, making it somewhat less convenient, but once you hear it, you'll not likely care. Fully adjustable in all set-up parameters though not VTA/SRA-adjustable "on the fly." Listen and you won't miss that either. MF, 338

Basis Audio SuperArm 9 and 12.5
$25,000 ($36,000 12.5" version, $45,500 16" version)
This "swing-for-the-fences" tonearm from A.J. Conti completely realigned RH's expectations of tonearm performance. As great an 'arm as Conti's own Vector IV is, the SuperArm is in another league. The SuperArm's reduction of hardness and glare fosters the impression of the midrange taking a step back, and with it, an invitation to greater musical intimacy. This purity and "cleanliness" of timbre is alone worth the price of admission, but the SuperArm also offers stunning rendering of music's dynamic structure, from the micro to the macro. Finally, the improvement rendered in the bass—pitch definition, texture, dynamics—is staggering. RH, 264

Acoustic Signature TA-9000 Neo
$27,995 9" tonearm; $29,995 12" tonearm
This fabulous aluminum tonearm is built up millimeter by millimeter via a selective-laser-melting process to produce a resonance-free structure impossible to create by any other means. (Internally, the 'arm has tree-branch-like "limbs" that connect its inner tube to an outer tube, channeling resonances like a grounding wire channels RF.) With highest-precision/tolerance ceramic bearings, the TA-9000 is as sonically invisible (and utterly imperturbable) as Acoustic Signature's fabulous Invictus turntables. Fully

DYNAUDIO Confidence **60**
Discover the full range at www.dynaudio.com/confidence

adjustable for VTA/SRA, VTF, azimuth, and anti-skate, the TA-9000 (in combination with the Invicti) is one of the most realistic-sounding source components JV has heard; when used with the fabulous DS Audio Grand Master optical cartridge, it rivals the timbral and dynamic continuousness and diorama-like three-dimensionality of reel-to-reel mastertapes. JV, 345

SAT CF1-09
$71,100
The SAT, the brainchild of Swedish designer Marc Gomez, will turn almost any LP collection into a veritable El Dorado of sonic treasures. Yes, it's that good. This nifty device allows top-notch turntables such as the Continuum Caliburn to reach even loftier levels of performance. In every parameter you can think of—dynamics, alacrity, transparency, and refinement—the SAT sets a very high bar, indeed, allying imperviousness to external vibrations with remarkable neutrality through the frequency spectrum. The tracking abilities of this tonearm are phenomenal as it sails through the most treacherous dynamic passages. The treble region is rendered with a finesse that approaches contemptuous ease. It is certainly one of the most significant analog products to emerge in recent years. JHb, 300

PHONO CARTRIDGES

Under $500

Ortofon 2M Red and Black
$99 and $695
The swansong design of Ortofon's former chief engineer Per Windfeld, the entry-level 2M Red uses an elliptical, the 2M Black a Shibata stylus. The Black's greatest attribute is the way it parses the complexities of orchestral depth and dimension. In comparison, the 2M Red clocks in with a little drier sound, as if it's making more of an effort in the upper treble. Still, this is one sophisticated and musical cartridge—for the price of a nice dinner for two. NG, 182

Grado Opus3
$275 (high- and low-output versions)
Grado's entry-level offering in the new Timbre Series is a little like going home again to a pre-digital age. With its mid-range tonal beauty and unvarnished musicality, its warmer overall signature and rich mid-range, this is classic Grado. There are still notes of dark chocolate in its voicing—a complex bittersweetness that favors highly resonant wooden instruments like cello and acoustic bass and winds like clarinet, oboe, and bassoon. The primary strength of the Opus3, however, is its resolution of timbral distinctions, its verdant naturalism, and its harmonic richness. Pure and simple, a celebration of LP playback. NG, 313

Audio-Technica VM540M
$279
Judged according to the highest standards, PS found the VM540M acquitted itself astonishingly in every aspect of performance. Its only tonal anomaly is a smooth, mild rise beginning at 5kHz to a maximum of 4–5dB at 11kHz–12kHz, which in the listening is remarkably benign and might even pass unnoticed in many systems. PS, 284

Shure V15 (Jico-mod)
$282
In 2004 the Shure corporation retired the seventh and last iteration of its by now legendary Shure V15 series, introduced in 1964, a moving-magnet design that established new standards for overall tonal neutrality, flat frequency response, and tracking ability. Such is its popularity among enthusiasts that the Japanese firm Jico markets replacement styli that actually improve upon the already outstanding original. For reviewer Paul Seydor, no other phono pickup, mc or mm, offers quite the combination of completely non-fatiguing, beautiful, natural sound without seriously compromising the liveliness, engagement, transparency, and involvement of the best mc's, while still, after all these decades, reigning supreme in tracking ability. It has long been and will long remain one of his reference pickups. PS, 334

Denon DL-103, DL-103R, DLA-2200
$349, $499, $599
Despite nomenclature and pricing, these are essentially different versions of the same pickup, hence their being grouped together. The DL-103 is the base model, manufactured exactly the same way since its introduction in 1962—by hand. It also enjoys a longer life without modification than any other phono cartridge in the history of audio, while also being one of the most beloved audio products ever made. The DLA-220GS, marketed as a special edition to commemorate Denon's 110th anniversary, is merely a 103 installed in an exclusive silver-graphite universal headshell and boxed in a fancy leather case. The DL-103R is a 103 with 6N copper wire for the coils, a finer wire made from a purer grade of copper, the sonic result is a slightly reduced extreme top end for a fractionally darker presentation that is nevertheless very pleasing albeit not quite so accurate as the stock 103. Regardless of which version you buy, you will still get all the virtues that account for its 60-plus years of popularity. PS, 328

Ortofon Quintet Red
$359
At $359 the Quintet Red (0.5mV) is on the low end of the price scale for moving-coil cartridges but it doesn't sound like a cheapskate. It's quick on transients, a sure-footed tracker, and a slam-dunk candidate for any thoughtful starter system. It drops some resolution and tonal purity at the frequency extremes and lacks some micro-information but retains a persuasive feel for the distinctive musicality of LP playback. NG, 244

Sumiko Bluepoint No. 3
$499 (high or low output)
The second-generation version of the Bluepoint Oyster—long considered a go-to choice among affordable, high-output moving-coil cartridges—the No. 2 offers improved resolution, superior three-dimensionality, richer and more potent bass, and smoother, less aggressive highs. A huge step up from entry-level cartridges. CM, 172

$500–$1000

Audio-Technica VM760SLC
$649
This moving-magnet phono pickup is the flagship of Audio-Technica's VM line. Outfitted with a line-contact stylus, the VM760 in PS's judgment acquitted itself astonishingly in every aspect of performance, including frequency response, tracking ability, transparency, and dynamic range. Its only tonal anomaly is a smooth, mild rise beginning at 5kHz that proves in the listening to be remarkably benign, might even pass unnoticed in many systems, and is easily correctable with treble tone-control. Intrinsically its performance is superb; factoring in price, it is a staggering cartridge. PS, 284

THE $10K TUBE PHONOSTAGE FOR 1/3 THE PRICE

"WITHOUT A DOUBT, A SONIC MASTERPIECE!"

- DICK OLSHER, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND

EVO 100 TUBE PHONOSTAGE

• ALL-TUBE DUAL MONO DESIGN • NO FETs, NO CHIPS

• 5AR4 TUBE RECTIFICATION AND EL34 FILTRATION • POINT-TO-POINT WIRING

PrimaLuna®

LEARN MORE | PRIMALUNA-USA.COM

WATCH THE VIDEO!

DISTRIBUTED IN THE AMERICAS BY HARMONIA DISTRIBUTION | HARMONIADISTRIBUTION.COM

CARBON

HANDCRAFTED IN THE USA
LIMITED LIFETIME WARRANTY

INTERCONNECT

XLR termination (also available with RCA)

"Carbon only serves one master—the music itself."

Neil Gader · The Absolute Sound · Issue 322

2022 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

KIMBER KABLE®

www.kimber.com - 801-621-5530

Excel Sound Corporation Hana SL
$750
In a sea of $10,000-ish super cartridges, what's a vinyl-playing audiophile with discriminating tastes to do? For that matter, what's a sub-$999 budgeted audiophile to do? The $750 Hana SL is the gem of the Excel lineup and can easily fit any 'table/'arm combo that will accommodate a 0.5mV output. With the Hana SL, the user can also rest assured the cartridge will support the next 'table/'arm upgrade. It represents what any more costly cartridge should offer as a bare minimum—and plenty more. AJ, 270

Ortofon Quintet Black
$999
The Quintet Series is a lineup of five low-to-mid-priced moving-coil cartridges that replaces the aging Rondo Series of mc's. At the top rung is the 0.3mV Quintet Black, which is given the royal treatment with niceties like neodymium magnets, a nude Shibata stylus, and a boron cantilever. Sonically, the Quintet Black displays even neutrality across the tonal spectrum with glimmers of midrange warmth. It has both a light touch and a commanding sense of control. Low-level information is reproduced with great precision. NG, 244

$1000–$2000

Clearaudio Maestro Ebony v2.1
$1500
The successor to the Maestro Wood, the Maestro V2 Ebony is an improvement in every way. With a higher 4.2mV output and an ultra-low-mass Micro HD stylus on a solid boron cantilever, the Ebony brings symphonic recordings to life, unifying each orchestral section into the greater whole. Low-level detail is speedily resolved. As musical as they come, NG thought the Maestro V2 Ebony should be required listening for moving-magnet and moving-coil fans alike. Co-winner of TAS' 2013 Phono Cartridge of the Year Award. NG, 234

$2000 and above

Lyra Delos
$2195
The Delos optimizes performance by properly orientating the magnetic circuits, signal coils, and core. With the cartridge at rest, asymmetrical dampers place the signal coils and core into a more upright angle vis-à-vis the magnetic circuit. With tracking force applied, the force of the stylus pushing on the LP causes the asymmetrical dampers to become symmetrical. An exceptionally quiet background is the most immediately striking aspect of this design. It is also very well balanced and notably coherent, natural, rich, and fast. WG, 206

Clearaudio Charisma v2.1
$2200
Clearaudio's literature artfully describes the Charisma V2 as founder Peter Suchy's "moving-magnet masterpiece." It offers a full palette of tonal color vibrancy and timbral complexity, with classic midrange heft and bloom, electrifying dynamics, and top-end sweetness. Tracking is unshakable and effortless, allowing transients to be reproduced with unalloyed naturalism. The Charisma also retrieves images like they're being monitored by LoJack. Output is a real world 3.6mV. Like its name implies, you've either got it or you don't. This cartridge has got it. NG, 284

Clearaudio Talisman v2.1
$2200
From the top of the midrange on down this second version of Clearaudio's Talisman low-output moving coil is one beautiful-sounding pickup, with a gorgeous midrange and bottom end, solid in all senses of the word, superb definition and clarity, and lots of heft and weight. Yet it's also dynamic as all get out, with terrific rhythmic spring and timing. However, there is also a mild brightness that is not necessarily unpleasant in and of itself, though it can be depending on the source. PS, 232

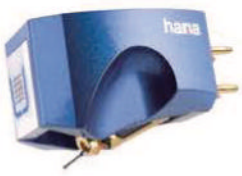
Dynavector Karat 17DX
$2350
Dynavector's 17DX, the fourth generation of a 20-year-old design, is ruler-flat top to bottom with all the life and liveliness of past Karats, the see-through transparency, the superb tracking, the crackling musicality, brilliance and clarity abounding. It also throws a wide and deep soundstage with extraordinary dynamics and resolution. PS, 172

Ortofon Cadenza Bronze
$2399
Ortofon claims the Bronze, a low-output moving coil in the company's Cadenza line, has been voiced to have a slightly warmer, more romantic sound. So, it proved in PS' listening, though the flavoring remains subtle, which is to say the Bronze is still very much an Ortofon as regards overall neutrality, transparency, clarity, resolution, tracking ability, dynamic range, imaging, and soundstaging. If you want an Ortofon with a dash of warmth, the Bronze might be just the ticket. PS, 232

Ortofon Synergy G SPU
$2429
The Synergy G retains the vintage look, sound, and technology of the original while being judiciously brought up to date in key areas, a nude elliptical stylus replacing the original conical stylus, resulting in better tracking. It comes already integrated into (and inseparable from) the classic Ortofon headshell with universal SME connector (medium- to high-mass arms preferred). If not sonically the last word in neutrality—there's a mild Gundry dip—it's one gorgeously seductive pickup, with saturated colors, life and liveliness to burn, and a prodigious bottom end of power, definition, and articulation, voices and instruments possessing almost preternatural body and dimensionality. PS, 346

DS Audio DS-003/DS-003 Equalizer
$2500 (phonostage, $3500)
Like its ten-times more expensive brother, the nonpareil DS Audio Grand Master, the DS 003 optical cartridge uses DS' new "dual-mono" optical/electrical generator, with independent LEDs and photodetectors for each channel. Again, like the Grand Master, it uses a featherweight, 99.9% beryllium shading plate that is 50% lighter than the aluminum one used in DS Audio's previous oc's (prior to the Grand Master). And once more like the GM, the DS Audio's internal wiring is 1.6 times thicker than it was in first- and second-gen DSes. These technological advancements make for virtually the same kind of sonic improvements that they do in the GM. Because of the dual-mono setup, channel separation is greatly enhanced—to the benefit of soundstaging and imaging. The reduction in mass improves tracking and lowers noise to a near-inaudible level, increasing resolution and dynamic range. The better wiring and improved equalization help render tonality in the same lusciously rich, full-bodied, deep-reaching fashion that you hear on the GM, with

tape, and in life. If you have a system that is capable of highest-resolution playback, then by all means go whole hog and get the fabulous POY Award-winning Grand Master duo. You won't regret it. But if you don't have state-of-the-art speakers and amplification (or money to burn), then for JV the choice is easy: Go for the DS 003. It is a simply marvelous transducer. JV, 330



Excel Sound Hana Umami Blue
$2500
A damped blue body, solid boron cantilever, nude microline stylus, cryogenic treatment (front and rear yokes, pole piece, and 24-karat gold-plated terminals), and an Alnico-magnet-based moving-coil generator with pure copper hand-wound on a Permalloy armature make up the core of this wonderful-sounding cartridge. All-around excellent, some of its standout virtues include its ability to swing dynamically from micro to macro while staying linear as it traverses levels in between. The Blue has a more illuminated character than other Hana cartridges, which moves it closer to neutral without crossing the line into analytical. The Blue traces and tracks the grooves surefootedly on complex passages, conveying a high level of transparency, harmonic complexity, speedy note-transitions, and timbral richness. It is a flash of "Blue" lightning at its price point. AJ, 341

Luxman LMC-5
$2695
Luxman's first phono pickup in four decades, over two years in development, much of it on the open-body structure to deal with microphonic resonances and reflections, the LMC-5, like all Luxman products, was voiced by ear through months of careful listening. Bass exhibits great definition, foundation, and power; midrange is rich, lovely, and tactile; top is clean, airy, and extended; presence region has a very slight ease-back that makes most orchestral recordings sound more natural than they probably are. The LMC-5 is a real music lovers' pickup that manages to eliminate listening fatigue without sacrificing those elusive qualities of transparency, dynamism, and liveliness that bring music to life in the home. PS, forthcoming

Ortofon MC Cadenza Black
$2899
A low-output (0.3mV) moving-coil cartridge featuring a nude Shibata stylus with a thin, stiff boron cantilever, the Cadenza Black brings a lot of the advanced technology found in Ortofon's more expensive offering, like the MC A90 and MC Anna, to a more affordable price. Here's a fast, tonally balanced, low-coloration pickup that has outstanding transparency, tonal neutrality, and openness without any brightness or stridency, plus very good soundstaging and dynamics. JH, 234

Kiseki Purple Heart NS
$3199
The most recent Kiseki Purple Heart captures all the magic of the original. At the same time, the newest version is quite different from the original. While they both use boron cantilevers, the latest has a different mounting method for the diamond, and its coils are wound from gold instead of OFC. Kiseki in Japanese means "miracle," and it is a fitting name for the Purple Heart NS. This moving-coil cartridge is easy to drive, tracks everything thrown at it, and has a relaxed yet detailed sound that, when mated with superb speakers, puts the performers in the listening room. JH, 306

Clearaudio Concerto v2.1
$3300
This is the entry-level cartridge in Clearaudio's "super-class" of moving coils, and super it is! The Concerto uses wood to add a touch of warmth and richness, yet retains the superb focus, resolution, transient quickness, and top-end extension that have been hallmarks of Clearaudio's reference cartridges. JH, 167

Miyajima Infinity Mono
$3475
The Infinity represents Miyajima's attempt to push the boundaries of mono reproduction one step beyond its previous flagship Zero cartridge. Its attempt has succeeded. The bulbous Infinity weighs in at some 6.4 grams, but the increase in size and weight from the more diminutive Zero do not in the slightest detract from its performance. Rather, they enhance it. The Infinity not only extracts more information from the grooves than the Zero but is also smoother and more extended in the treble. For anyone interested in playing mono LPs, the Infinity is a must-audition. JHb, 309

Kuzma CAR 40
$3493
Outfitted with a boron cantilever, a material PS always associates with neutrality, the CAR exhibited superb imaging and soundstaging, wide and deep if the recording calls for it, and close and intimate with other kinds of recordings. The top end sounds extended yet very easy on the ears, and it's transparent without thrusting a whole lot of detail that has little or nothing to do with the natural reproduction of music. Suppression of surface noise is very good, and tracking is excellent. Its synergy with the Stabi M and 4 Point speaks for itself. PS, 248

Benz Micro SLR Gullwing
$3500
Very quiet and transparent to sources, the SLR Gullwing is a stunning-sounding moving-coil cartridge that somehow manages not to place layers of electro-mechanical stuff between the music and us. It breaks through room boundaries and time frames by delivering highly convincing facsimiles of all that it touches—chamber groups, orchestras, voices, jazz, rock, you name it. The overall result is music that sounds more produced than reproduced. WG, 206

Hana Umami Red
$3950
The Hana Umami Red has exceptional balance that allows the musical timbre of instruments and vocals to present themselves truthfully. If you couple this with excellent micro/macro-dynamics, the ability to unravel harmonic complexity, an ever-so-slight tilt toward warmth, and smooth yet extended high frequencies, you have an excellent transducer. The Umami Red is the best sounding cartridge to come from the Excel factory. At its price point, the Umami Red provides deliciously enjoyable class-leading performance compared with cartridges in the same price range. AJ, 319

Soundsmith Paua MK II ES/ Sussurro MKII ES
$3999/$4999
Inspired by tonearm-designer Frank Schröder, Soundsmith's Peter Lederer designed both moving-iron cartridges with the following features: ultra-low effective moving

"BRAVO, INDEED"

WAYNE GARCIA, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND, ISSUE 342

2023 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD WINNER

THE ABSOLUTE SOUND. ISSUE 345

BRAVO TURNTABLE &
BRAVO VECTOR TONEARM

WORLD'S GREATEST

2023 PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD

BASIS

BASISAUDIO.COM / 603.889.4776

HAND-BUILT IN THE USA FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS

mass, resulting in superlative transient and micro-detail performance; virtually hum-free operation due to six-sided HyMu80 magnetic shielding; and mc preamp compatibility. All Lederer's claims are borne out in the listening. Reviewer AHC found both cartridges to be reference-quality. AHC, 219

Benz Micro Ruby Z
$4000
Housed in a handsome Zebrawood body, the Swiss-made Benz Ruby Z's name refers to the ruby square plate at the core of the coil winding, which has the advantages of being both lightweight—hence, ultra-fast and responsive—and non-ferreous, so magnetic interference is rendered moot. The Ruby Z delivers a finely nuanced balance, combining the natural warmth, textural, and tactile elements of all instruments with excellent detail, dynamic snap, and a rollicking verve that makes music sizzle with life. The experience is not only wholly immersive, but the Ruby Z is also one of audio's finest values. WG, 344

Clearaudio Stradivari v2.1
$4400
In his recent survey of five moving-coil pickups, PS gave the Stradivari his personal "Golden Mean" award because it ideally mediates warmth and detail, control and relaxation, liveliness and listenability, at virtually no sacrifice in tonal neutrality. There is an organic rightness about this pickup that elevates it to reference-caliber. PS, 172

Sumiko Palo Santos Presentation
$4499
The Palo Santos Presentation is Sumiko's elegant flagship moving coil (0.5mV). Its signature veers subtly to the full-blooded and warmer end of the spectrum, with just a hint of upper-treble shading. It flags ever so slightly in bottom-end resolving power and the final swirl of orchestral air and bloom, but this beauty conveys complexities of timbre and space that are nothing short of authentic. NG, 206

Benz Micro LP S
$5000
Equipped with a dandy micro-ridge stylus and a sophisticated magnetic engine, the Benz LP S has less of an electromechanical signature than most other 'coils. As a result, transparency to sources is markedly increased. This is a very high-resolution, very low-noise mc with a remarkably sweet and lifelike treble. In the right 'arm, it can consistently reveal details you've never heard before without ever sounding analytical. One of JV's mc references. JV, 216

DS Audio DS-W3
$5000 ($14,995 with equalizer)
Name another recent technological advance that has changed the audio scene as much as DS Audio's optical cartridges have. If you can't, that's because there is none. Moreover, DS has not rested on its laurels. It keeps improving its offerings with technologies trickled down from its top products and keeps populating its line with reasonably priced entries. To wit, the W3, which is quite simply the best-sounding "affordable" oc that JV has heard in his system. If you don't have the dough for a Grand Master EX but want something a bit better (in all regards) than the terrific 003, here's your chance to come *very* close to the fabulous sound (and fabulous noiselessness) of DS' top offering for $50k less. JV, forthcoming

Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti
$5459
The Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti is the newest version of the original MC Windfeld cartridge—a previous TAS Product of the Year Award winner. The Ti's body structure is SLM (selective laser melted) titanium and stainless steel; its motor is like that of the MC A95. Sonically, the Ti allows a listener to play nearly every album in his catalog without being bothered by any sins of commission. If you value neutrality and high resolution, low coloration and low distortion, and tracking ability that rivals the best moving magnets, then this outstanding new moving-coil is for you. AJ, 286

Koetsu Rosewood Signature
$5495
Yoshiaki Sugano's (1907–2002) legacy of iconic masterwork moving-coil designs is perfectly exemplified by the current Rosewood Signature. Expect breathtaking soundstage transparency combined with a tuneful full-bodied lower midrange, 3-D spatiality, and unrestrained dynamics. It tracks well at 1.8g and resolves low-level detail without sounding analytical. It sings with emotional intensity while avoiding upper-octave brightness. The bass range is tightly defined and well-integrated with the lower midrange. It is in essence a gift for the music lover who would like to kick back at the end of a day and just enjoy the music. DO, 295

Van den Hul Crimson XGW Stradivarius
$5495
With a body handmade of Hawaiian koa wood triple-coated with a special Stradivarius-type lacquer, the Crimson uses 24-karat gold coils and a cantilever that is solid boron with a VDH Type 1s (2x85-micron) stylus. The Crimson XGW Stradivarius is impartial across most of the frequency spectrum (including the presence range), with large macro-dynamics from the power region on down. Quite forceful on transients but less delicately detailed than its twice-as-expensive Colibri XGW Signature Stradivarius cousin, the Crimson counters by surpassing the Colibri in sheer bottom-octave drive on propulsive music. AJ, 279

Ortofon Verismo
$6999
The Verismo's body is made of titanium and uses Ortofon's Selective Layer Melting process to form a dense and ridged structure with high internal damping. Combined with the Replicant 100 stylus, Aucurum coils, low-magnetic armature, and field stabilizing element, the Verismo has the added advantage of an upgraded Wide Range Damping system (a platinum disc between two dissimilar rubber absorbers containing Multi-Wall Carbon Nano Tubes). As a result of these technologies, the Verismo boasts improved tracking abilities that put its performance at a high level. The Verismo tracks grooves effortlessly, providing a greater amount of perceived realism than AJ can remember from this cartridge manufacturer. If you want fully balanced performance with an ever-so-slight hint of warmth that completely avoids any sense of excess top-end aggression, the 2022 Golden Ear Award-winning Verismo is worth consideration. AJ, 339

NCF®

NCF Nano Crystal² Formula

FURUTECH

NCF®

Nano Crystal² Formula - Nano Crystalline, Ceramic and Carbon Powder

Incorporated into Furutech NCF products, Nano Crystal² Formula — NCF features a special crystalline material that has two 'active' properties. First, it generates negative ions that eliminate static. Second, it converts thermal energy into far infrared. Furutech combines this remarkable material with nano-sized ceramic particles and carbon powder for their additional 'piezoelectric effect' damping properties. The resulting Nano Crystal² Formula is the ultimate electrical and mechanical damping material. Created by Furutech, it is found exclusively in Furutech products.

Introducing

NCF Clear Line RCA & XLR "Line Optimizer"

an antistatic, resonance damping plug for vacant component RCA & XLR sockets featuring Furutech's NCF material.

AWARD アクセサリー銘機賞 2024

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED Product

2023 MJ Technology Of The Year 入賞

Paul Rigby GROOVY 6/10

NCF Clear Line RCA

Line Optimizer

Plug and play, you'll notice the effects immediately. With overwhelming improvement in S/N (signal-to-noise) ratio, you'll experience an increase in detail information, taking your listening or viewing experience to the next level and enhancing the reproduction of subtle nuances. Without coloring the sound, it brings out the original appeal of your sound source.

NCF Clear Line XLR

Line Optimizer

AWARD アクセサリー銘機賞 2024 Grand Prix (グランプリ)

Powerflux-NCF C15

power cord

AWARD アクセサリー銘機賞 2024 Grand Prix (グランプリ)

2023 MJ Technology Of The Year 入賞

GTO-D3 NCF power distributor

GTO-D2 NCF power distributor

The Furutech GTO-D3 NCF & GTO-D2 NCF distribution blocks are packed with Furutech top-end wiring and componentry and feature Furutech's antistatic, antiresonance, sound revealing NCF material – all without the top-end price. Pair with Furutech's Powerflux-NCF power cord for true high-end performance.

NCF® is a registered trademark of Furutech Co., Ltd. Japan

WWW.FURUTECH.COM

Elite Audio Video Distribution

California (818) 245-6037
info@eliteavdist.com
www.eliteavdist.com

Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum
$8495
Befitting a transducer from Koetsu, the latest Rosewood Signature Platinum mc boasts a midrange to die for. What differentiates it from the other two Rosewood models in the line (the less pricey Rosewood and the Rosewood Signature) are a stiffer body composed of lacquered, aged rosewood, plus the rare platinum magnets and silver-plated 6N copper coils normally reserved for Koetsu's stone-body cartridges. Along with that famous midband expect a wide-open, highly convincing recreation of the recorded soundstage, with plenty of air and depth, a seductively rich palette of instrumental colors and textures, and plenty of bottom-end wallop. A classic, Koetsu's Rosewood Signature Platinum seduces our ears, brains, and beings with intellectual and emotional pleasure. JH, 317

My Sonic Lab Signature Gold
$8995
My Sonic Lab is one of those little cartridge companies that are unknown to all but a lucky few. The design goal was to increase a moving-coil's output signal without also increasing the number of coil turns. (More coil turns result in losses of detail and bandwidth.) The discovery of a new core material (SH-ÊX) allowed the designer to replace the commonly used iron alloys and create his dream mc, with the lowest amount of signal loss combined with the highest relative output. The Signature Gold hits all the right notes: It tracks like crazy, delivers exceptional detail, energy, and dynamics, and generates a holographic soundstage with spot-on imaging, as well as a great purity of tone and "your-are-thereness." WG, 317

Lyra Etna Lambda/Lambda SL
$9895/$10,995
The Etna offers the most winning set of attributes that Lyra has produced. Vocals have a physicality and palpability that provide an unprecedented realism. The sense of snap and pacing is also exemplary. A silky continuity that eluded previous Lyra efforts is also abundantly apparent, partly a product of very quiet backgrounds. Careful matching with a phonostage is necessary, especially in the case of the Super Low (SL) version, which outputs a mere 0.25mV. But this amazing cartridge will take most vinyl reproduction to a new level. AT, 305, 338

Ortofon MC Diamond
$9999
Ortofon's most evolved moving coil generator system is housed in an optimally shaped, selective laser melt (SLM) titanium body. A detail-resolving nude Replicant 100 stylus/solid diamond cantilever assembly mated to a non-magnetic armature minimally wound with high purity copper wire still manages to produce 0.2mV thanks to a powerful, efficient neodymium magnet system. A re-engineered version of Ortofon's WRD (Wide Range Damping) system uses a newly developed in-house Multi-Wall Carbon Nano-Tube suspension material. The result is a high resolution, low coloration, wide dynamic range ride through the grooves. MC Diamond is an imaging and soundstaging champion. Unrivaled build-quality and uniformity.
MF, 338

Air Tight PC-1 Supreme
$10,575
As good as the AT PC-1 is, this considerably pricier moving-coil from Air Tight is substantially better in every way. Like the PC-1, the Supreme is a model of low internal impedance and high energy. Killer good on transients top to bottom, with phenomenal grip and definition in the low bass, it is also exceptionally lifelike in the midband, with even more of the gorgeous density of tone color, high resolution, and superior soundstaging that made the PC-1 such a breakthrough. RH's reference. JV, 190

Van den Hul Colibri XGW Signature Stradivarius
$11,995
The top-of-the line Colibri XGW Signature Stradivarius (0.75mV output) features a Koa wood body with triple Stradivarius-type lacquer coating, 24-karat gold coils, solid boron cantilever, and VDH Type 1s stylus. It is characterized by a clarity and lucidity in the presence region, coupled with a smoothness and sweetness in the treble. It is also dynamically authoritative, with lively and propulsive transient reproduction. AJ, 279

Soundsmith SG-200 Strain-Gauge
$11,999
Using neither magnets nor coils, Soundsmith's strain-gauge cartridge generates a signal via a crystal that modulates the flow of DC through it in response to pressure generated by stylus movement. This scheme requires a specialized preamplifier to deliver this DC, and to decode the audio signal. The sonic virtues of the Soundsmith system include extremely low noise, a highly resolved soundstage, and natural rendering of timbre. Price varies according to the preamplifier's features, display, and number of inputs. AHC, 201

HiFiction X-Quisite ST
$13,160
The X-Quisite cartridge is constructed in Switzerland with horological precision. Right off the bat, the translucency and transient accuracy of this 0.3mV moving coil are abundantly apparent. There may, in fact, be no other cartridge that quite manages to duplicate its lock on the transient note, a quality that provides a kind of window into the performer's intention that is difficult to forget. The X-Quisite revels in disinterring previously obscured detail but is in no way astringent. The finest shadings, the most delicate filigree, are presented with aplomb. JHb, 317

Lyra Atlas Lambda/Atlas Lambda SL
$13,195/$14,295
If you're in the market for a top-end cartridge, Lyra offers not one but two versions of its signature Atlas. The first has 0.56mV output, the second 0.25mV. Which one to choose? The regular Atlas offers a bit more slam and sizzle than the super-low-output version. But the lower-output Atlas provides more finesse and lower noise. Rock aficionados will probably gravitate to the regular Atlas, but for classical the higher-priced cartridge is probably the better match. But both are superlative cartridges that will provide a spellbinding presentation of well-nigh any LP. JHb, 276, 284

Air Tight Opus-1
$14,975
Air Tight's top-line moving-coil cartridge adds even more resolution, dimensionality, and energy to

ACOUSTIC SIGNATURE

FUTURE CLASSIC!

VERONA NEO

www.acoustic-signature.com

+1 (888) 2796765 for North America only

15 YEARS WARRANTY

the beautiful reproduction of tone color and superior soundstaging that the PC-1 Supreme is justly famous for. Though not quite the non-stop thrill-machine and sonic vacuum cleaner that the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement is, the Opus has a smoother, better-behaved upper midrange and treble and (building on one of the strengths of the Supreme) phenomenally deep-reaching, superbly defined, extraordinarily quick and powerful bass. Quite neutral in balance, it has the speed and resolution of über-cartridges, without any trace of the analytic. One of JV's and RH's references. JV, 261

DS Audio Grand Master
$15,000 ($45,000 for Grand Master equalizer and PS)
The DS Audio Grand Master optical transducer comes closer to the sound of R2R tape than any other phono cartridge on the market. Yes, it is expensive, though you don't have to buy the dedicated Grand Master EQ/PS units to get your sonic money's worth. (Any DS Audio EQ device will work with it—and there is a wide variety of them at a wide variety of prices, starting around $2k.) Unlike every other phono cartridge and phonostage on the market, the Grand Master and its EQ units are dead quiet—without a trace of the hum, buzz, RF, and self-noise that we've simply learned to live with. The elimination of the usual background racket, coupled to an optical system's inherently deeper and fuller presentation of the bass and lower midrange, rich, supremely detailed midband, and sweet, airy, ribbon-like treble, makes for the most "complete" and (given a great LP) most realistic reproduction of the music and musicians on LPs JV has yet heard. A Grand Masterpiece. JV, 317

Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement V2.1
$17,500
The original Statement and the V2 were gorgeous-sounding devices that made even flawed records sound fairly good. The V2.1 is more honest and less forgivingly *gemütlich* than its predecessors. On a great record, like Jack DeJohnette's landmark free-jazz album *Special Edition* (ECM), the V2.1's wonderful distinction of tone colors and performance details (e.g., the big, dark, hollow column of David Murray's bass clarinet, the higher-pitched, more nasal and piercing timbre of Arthur Blythe's alto sax, the sweet, baritone voice of Peter Warren's bowed cello, and the huge shimmering disc of DeJohnette's crash cymbal on "One for Eric" and "Zoot Suite") is astoundingly realistic. Widely and distinctly imaged on Clearaudio's famously vast, three-dimensional soundstage, the quartet, their instruments, their touch and tone are reproduced so faithfully and completely that you can almost see them playing there in front of you. JV, 341

TAPE DECKS

J-Corder Technics 1500
$7495 ($9495 with enhanced record/playback option)
If you are interested in archiving your precious vinyl, this completely rebuilt, highly reliable Technics prosumer reel-to-reel deck will make you think that the taped copies are better than the originals. A second playback head and external electronics are needed to play prerecorded CCIR-compatible tapes, like those from Tape Project. A wide range of options makes further customization a breeze. Forthcoming

Analog Audio Design TP-1000
$20,000
Four years in the making, this French version of a playback-only, 2-track, ¼" Studer/ReVox deck, with Studer heads, selectable EQ (IEC or NAB), selectable speeds (15 and 7½ips), and a simply fabulous touchscreen control panel, is the best-sounding quasi-affordable tape player JV has ever heard, challenging the sonics of the Big Boys in every regard and exceeding them in the bass. A simply fabulous-sounding offering, the TP-1000 is also a flat-out steal at $20k. Buy it while the price remains low! JV, forthcoming

Sonorus Audio ATR10 MKII
$32,500
A modern two-track, 15ips, quarter-inch tape deck based on the venerable ReVox PR99 chassis, which uses the same mechanical parts as the Studer/ReVox professional machines and entirely new electronics, including tape drive, power supplies, and playback circuits. Warm and beautiful sounding, the tube-amplified ATR10 is a virtual plug-and-play device. Just connect to your linestage and you can access the highest-fidelity source material currently on the market. JV (MKII version not yet reviewed)

United Home Audio Ultima5
$35,000 (optional OPS-DC outboard DC power supply, $6500)
High-quality 15ips reel-to-reel tapes are (direct-to-disc LPs aside) the *ne plus ultra* of analog sources—unrivaled in fidelity, musicality, and, alas, expense. If you can afford genuine first- or second-generation dubs of great mastertapes, then you can also afford a deck that plays them back with all their fidelity and musicality intact. In JV's experience, Greg Beron's UHA Ultima4 OPS-DC was just such a product—one of the highest-fidelity source components JV had heard, with phenomenal bass power and extension, matchlessly continuous dynamics top to bottom, unrivaled resolution, astonishing transient speed, and simply gorgeous tone color. However, Greg's latest tape deck, the Ultima5 OPS-DC simply beats his previous *wunderkind* out in every possible way, approaching (though not quite equalizing) the glories of Greg's SuperDeck (from which it borrows some of its technology). For those of you with the moolah and the itch to come as close to the sound of the real thing as possible, the Ultima5 OPS-DC is the ticket to ride. JV, 338

Metaxas & Sins Tourbillon T-RX
$49,000
The most compact, coolest-looking, best-sounding portable tape deck JV has heard, the T-RX is a brand-new component—not a refurbished, updated vintage one from the Golden Age of tape recording. Designed with Stellavox founder Georges Quellet's blessing as an updated version of his fabled and fabulous Stellavox SM8, it is the very model of highest fidelity. As JV said in his review, if the phrase "the absolute sound" means what it says, then 15/30ips mastertape playback through the T-RX is what it means. If you have the money for Kostas Metaxas' little wonder (and for the 15/30ips tapes to feed it with), you will be buying a freehold in the top tier of the absolute sound—and a piece of gear that will endlessly delight you with its mechanical and sonic excellence. JV, 324

Paradigm®
Celebrating Excellence with The Absolute Sound's 2024 Editors' Choice Awards!
Paradigm is thrilled and deeply honored to receive The Absolute Sound's 2024 Editors' Choice Awards for Persona 9H, Founder 80F, and Signature Series Sub 2. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to The Absolute Sound's Editors for their dedication to evaluating and celebrating our efforts in striving for audio excellence.
Additionally, we sincerely appreciate the loyal readership of The Absolute Sound. Your passion for high-quality audio and discerning taste drives us to continuously raise the bar and create products that resonate with your expectations. Your enthusiasm and support inspire us to push the limits of audio technology.
At Paradigm, we remain committed to delivering audio solutions that captivate and enrich your listening experience. These awards are an affirmation of our past endeavours and a catalyst for future innovations. We are excited about the journey ahead and look forward to continuing to exceed your expectations.
2024
the absolute sound
EDITORS' CHOICE
AWARDS
Scan to learn more about Founder Series
MADE IN CANADA
Designed, engineered, and fully Made in Canada, by people who love great audio (just like you).
Scan to learn more about Persona Series

United Home Audio SuperDeck
$89,998
This completely refurbished, three-box, 15ips, Tascam reel-to-reel tape deck, with bespoke enclosures, boards, parts, damping, and wiring, is the best effort yet from tape maven Greg Beron—and one of the two most lifelike source components JV has yet heard in his home. Though the speed, color, resolution, and, above all else, vanishingly low noise of the DS Audio Grand Master optical cartridge and EQ units have pushed vinyl playback considerably closer to the sound of tape, LPs still aren't as naturally full in tone, continuous in duration and intensity, or audibly complete in their presentation as R2R tapes through the UHA SuperDeck. Of course, two-track open-reel tapes have built-in sonic advantages—not the least of which is the sheer amount of information laid down in their wider tracks and the higher resolution with which those tracks are scanned—all of which you can hear, par excellence, with Beron's great new machine. Given the price of pre-recorded R2R tapes, the SuperDeck may be a wealthy man's game, but if you have the dough and a hankering for the sound of the real thing, it will be tough to find a better full-sized tape player. JV, 319

RECORD-CLEANING MACHINES

Spin-Clean Record Washer MKII
$79 (Deluxe model, $125)
The Spin-Clean System is a purely manual design—nothing to plug in. A little elbow grease and fresh air do all the work. Fill the taxicab-yellow basin with distilled water, add a capful of the cleaning solution, and spin the record between the brushes. The results speak for themselves—clean surfaces mean less noise and more fully resolved music. For lighter duty it's tough to beat. PS, 201

Record Doctor VI
$299
For those who love and care for their vinyl but don't want to break the bank on a cleaner, the Record Doctor VI offers a smart design compromise that keeps its—and your—costs down: Most of its functions are performed manually, but it still uses a powerful motor-driven vacuum to handle the final step of dirt extraction. Setup and operation are a snap. JM, 274

Pro-Ject VC-E2
$499
Using the VC-E is simple, but good technique is essential to maximize its potential. The machine comes with a small bottle of concentrated cleaning fluid, a larger bottle for the mixed-with-water cleaning solution, and a cleaning brush. The Pro-Ject VC-E supplies the basic tools necessary to clean records efficiently and easily. For any LP lover who wants to hear every bit of potential sonic goodness from his records, the VC-E is an excellent way to boost your LP collection up to a cleaner state of being. SS, 306 (latest VC-E2 not yet reviewed)

Degritter Ultrasonic LP Cleaner
$3250
The breadbox-sized Degritter brings all the benefits of ultrasonic LP cleaning to an effective, easy-to-use, and relatively affordable product. You can adjust the Degritter's many cleaning parameters, or simply choose a standard cleaning cycle for easy operation. Sonically, the Degritter delivers, with fewer ticks and pops, less surface noise, a blacker background, and a heightened impression of instruments in space. Easy to use, well-built, with many sophisticated features, the Degritter delivers on all the promises of ultrasonic LP cleaning. RH, 320

Audio Desk Systeme Vinyl Cleaner
$3995
This completely automated record cleaner is simply the state of the art. The ultrasonic cleaning technique loosens dirt embedded in groove modulations that are too small for even the finest bristles. The sonic results go far beyond quieter surfaces. The Audio Desk renders a dramatic increase in resolution, soundstaging, and immediacy. JHb, 234

Clearaudio Double Matrix Professional Sonic
$6500
The latest version of Clearaudio's record cleaning machine retains all the convenience of the Double Matrix (simultaneous cleaning of both sides of a record) while adding ultra-sonic scrubbing to the original brush-and-fluid method. Built like a tank and easy to use, this is a highest-quality record cleaner. JV

EQUIPMENT RACKS

Mapleshade LP Racks
$100
With the premium vinyl resurgence of the last few years, record collections are increasing once again. Run out of rack space? Mapleshade rides to the rescue. Its racks are constructed of ¾" finished or unfinished oak or finished Ambrosia maple and are still hand-crafted by the Amish family that also builds Mapleshade's massive Samson racks. NG, 245

Mye Sound Stands
Price varies with model
These aftermarket stand/braces designed for Maggie dipole loudspeakers have no downside, according to reviewer Jacob Heilbrunn—only up. Punchier, tauter bass, quieter backgrounds, cleaner mids and highs, increased snap and speed, less smearing and fuzziness are just a few of the benefits.

Sanus SF26 Steel Foundation
$209
Sanus' thoughtfully designed and beautifully executed SF Series speaker stands do everything you could want a good set of stands to do, and at a price that makes sense. Strong, rigid, and resonance-free, they include provisions for installing sand or lead-shot damping and are easy to assemble.

Sound Anchor FSTT
$350-$400
For anyone who has a dedicated nearfield desktop system the Sound Anchor FSTT stands are simply indispensable. Their combination of superb stability, variable height flexibility, and mass-damped isolation is unmatched by other desktop stands. For the many music lovers whose primary listening environment is a nearfield desktop. If you want to optimize your nearfield listening environment, get yourself a pair of FSTT stands. SS, 333

TonTräger Harbeth M40.3 XD
$1850
These all-wood German stands, light weight with mortise-and-tenon construction, using only water-based glue and eschewing any plastic or metal, are unbelievably strong and rigid. Supporting PS's Harbeth Monitor 40.3s, the TonTrägers provided greater dynamic range, clarity, articulation, and definition, with none, but none, of the typical

SIMPLY ICONIC

Alumine Two.Five

Stenheim's latest creation: the iconic simplicity of the Alumine Two's ground-breaking design now in a floorstanding speaker with double bass drivers to provide room-filling sound.

STENHEIM

excessively etched, edgy, analytical penalties of spiked metal stands. Although made for Harbeths—there's a stand for every model in the line—they should prove equally effective with any speaker requiring stand mounting, provided the TonTrägers fit the speaker's footprint and situate its tweeters at ear level. PS, 299

Solid Tech Rack of Silence
Pricing varies
The aptly named Rack of Silence helps damp equipment vibrations, thus fostering audibly quieter backgrounds and heightened resolution of detail. The core of the system is a sophisticated, extruded aluminum rack with skeletal, X-shaped equipment "shelves." Reference versions come with suspended shelves that support a wide range of components—even heavyweight amps.

Critical Mass Systems Sotto Voce
$3500 (three-shelf rack, natural or black)
This CMS equipment rack not only looks good and is, at one-tenth the cost of the company's flagship, more than fairly priced; it just plain works. Bass tightens, transients gain verve yet maintain control, rhythms sharpen and—perhaps most significantly—subliminal low-level noise plummets. By getting what AT calls the "random energy" out of the sound, the SV delivers a less electronic, less hurried, less blurred presentation of the music. This is a rack you can buy and live with happily ever after. Or, when fortune smiles, you can upgrade to your heart's content. AT, 249

Critical Mass Systems Maxxum Amplifier Stand
$6250
This beautifully built product is based on the same technology found in Critical Mass Systems' Maxxum equipment racks; the stands are essentially a Maxxum shelf mounted on a four-point X-shaped support structure. Sonically, this amplifier stand allows the system to better resolve low-level information, reveal music's transient structure, and interestingly, seems to make the loudspeakers "disappear" more easily. Once heard, it is impossible to resist. RH, 250

Stillpoints ESS and ESS Turntable Rack
$8450–$75,000 (depending on configuration)
Stillpoints has always possessed an uncanny ability to lower the noise floor with its innovative footers. But its amp stands and ESS racks are simply brilliantly innovative designs that will take your system even further into the realm of stygian silence. Both are based around an unobtrusive open architecture that allows your audio gear to take pride of place rather than a bulky rack. The amp stands can be adjusted to fit pretty much any amplifier and dramatically improve dynamics and interstitial detail. The same goes for the ESS racks, which offer an elegant and effective solution for housing your precious audio gear. RH, 255; JHb, 312

Critical Mass Systems Maxxum
$18,750 (three-shelf rack)
A gorgeous, pricey, four-leg, three-shelf unit, the CMS Maxxum is quite simply the ne plus ultra in component stands. In all his years, JV has never used a support device that reduces resonance to this extent without also killing the life of the music. Far from damping out color and energy, the Maxxum enhances both to an extent that must be heard to be appreciated. Transients are lightning quick, low-level detail is clear as a bell, pitch definition is superb, and timbre is rich and dense in color from bottom to top. For those of you with the money, this is unquestionably the stand to own. RH heartily concurs. JV, 226

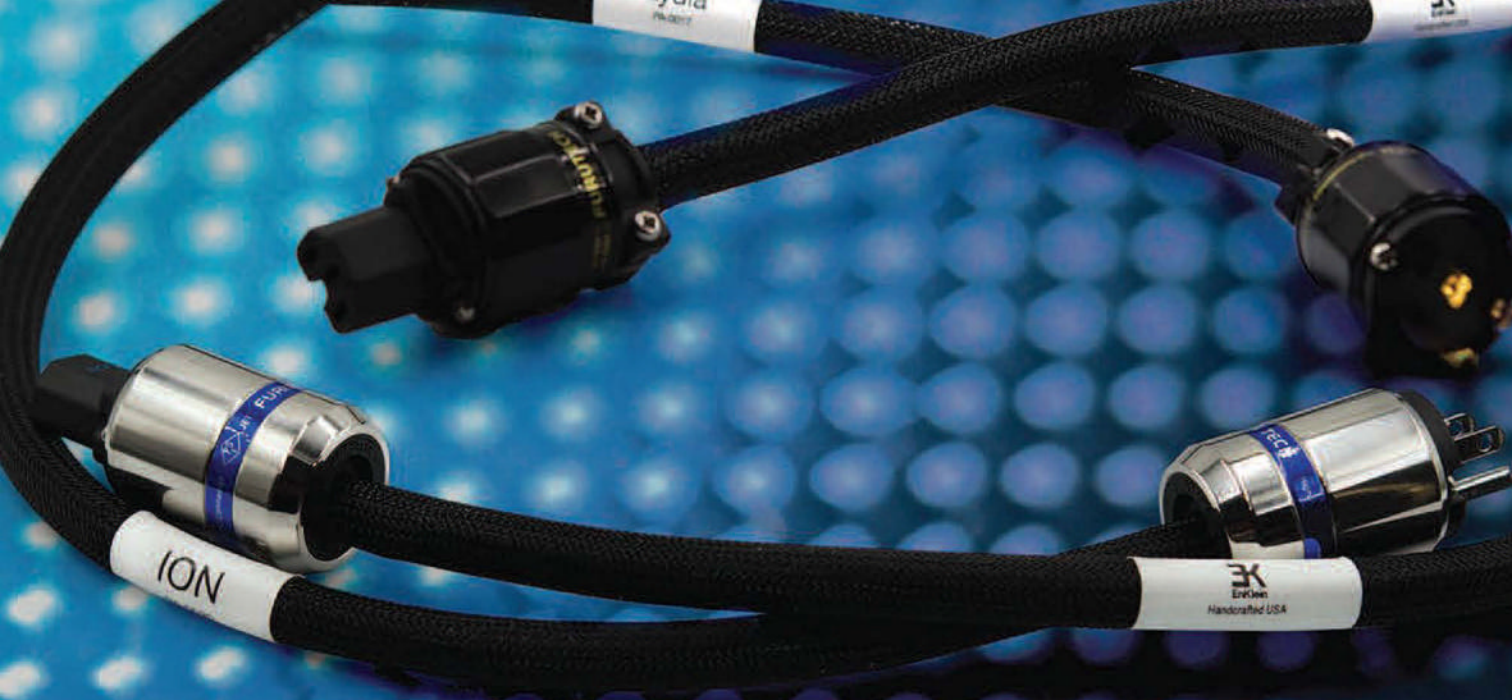
Critical Mass Systems Olympus
$30,750 (three-shelf rack)
The flagship of the Critical Mass Systems line, the Olympus lives up to its name in size, sheer visual presence, and most importantly, sound quality. This no-holds-barred equipment stand features CMS's most advanced implementation of its technology for reducing component vibration. The Olympus equipment rack and matching amplifier stands lower the noise floor, allowing fine timbral, dynamic, and spatial details to emerge as well as allowing the system to create a rock-solid bass foundation. The build- and finish-quality are nothing short of spectacular. The Olympus' performance is taken to another level when it is used in conjunction with CMS's CenterStage2 isolation devices. Matching amplifier stands are $10,250 each. Expensive but worth it if you want the best. RH's reference.

HRS VXR
$35,680 with M3X2 Isolation Bases (+damping plate, Helix footers)
Harmonic Resolution Systems supplies one of the most effective resonance-control systems in high-end audio. At the heart of its line is the VXR stand. The high-mass VXR, composed of a custom, billet-machined, heat-treated aluminum frame, appears to reduce, and not by a small margin, subliminal hash and grain, endowing the music with a sense of hush, or, if you prefer, black backgrounds, from which sounds emerge with greater fidelity. To complement its impressive stand, HRS also offers several other products, including a damping plate as well as Helix footers. JHb, 319

GROUNDING DEVICES

Shunyata Altaira CG-NR Hub
$2998/hub (cable, $250–$800)
Shunyata's Altaira grounding system is composed of one or more passive "hubs," which you connect to the ground terminals of your components via specially made ground cables. The Altaira ground cables can be fitted with interchangeable terminations to fit any system and to adapt to component upgrades. It turns out that evacuating noise from the components' grounds has profound effects on sound quality, and not just in areas that you would suspect—blacker backgrounds and greater resolution of low-level detail. Rather, the Altaira system's benefits were manifold: increased timbral liquidity, more body and texture to images, greater clarity of instrumental lines, and a more relaxed, refined, and realistic presentation overall. 2022 Product of the Year Award winner. RH, 334

Nordost QKore Grounding System
QKore1, $2999; QKore3, $4099; QKore6, $5749
The QKore grounding system truly demonstrates that silence is golden. It represents an ingenious attempt to combat the electronic nasties that conspire to corrupt the sound of electronic musical reproduction. Unlike many products that purport to produce a purer sound, the QKore is a non-invasive grounding device that you plug into an unused input on a stereo component;



BETTER RESOLUTION

GREATER EMOTIONAL CONNECTION TO THE MUSIC

JUST LISTEN!

EnKlein

WWW.ENKLEIN.COM

it produces no extra-musical artifacts of its own. What it does is create a much blacker background from which the subtlest of details emerge with elegance and refinement. Every part of the sonic spectrum will also sound fuller and more transparent. For any high-end enthusiast seeking to improve his system, this is an essential component. JHb, 283

POWER CONDITIONERS & DISTRIBUTORS

Tributaries T10 Power Strip
$145

Equipped with two rows of five outlets. One row of five outlets rotates 90 degrees so that plugs can lie flat along the floor. LEDs indicate operation, grounding, and protection status. Offering plenty of surge suppression and noise filtering for AC power as well as signal-line protection for telecomm, network, and cable, it's a bargain for its segment. Various cords included.

Shunyata Research Venom Defender
$300

Bravo to Shunyata for designing a system that recognizes the fact that not everyone has the cash, space or the inclination to run dedicated lines into a listening room. Apartment dwellers take note. You'll never look at power strips and AC power quite the same way again. The Venom Defender brings much of the technology and many of the sonic improvements of Shunyata's expensive conditioners to a more affordable price. NG, 239

Audience forte V8
$980 (includes forte f3 powerChord)

The Audience forte V8 power strip gets right down to business with eight hospital-grade AC outlets, each wired separately with high-purity, 14AWG copper. Plus, the entire electric circuit has been treated cryogenically. The V8 performed impeccably, with no discernible losses, changes, or degradations versus wall outlets. If anything, backgrounds seemed quieter and low-level transparency more fully resolved. Bass response also firmed up and conveyed greater control. Soundstage dimensionality and ambience retrieval were enhanced, to boot. Impeccable in construction quality, virtually unbreakable, and not liable to break the bank, the V8 ships with the exceptional forte f3 powerChord. All in all, a no-brainer. NG, 311

Audience aR-2p/aR12/aR12-T3/aR6-T4
$1200/$5990/$9700/$7035

Used with a CD player, the aR2p—Audience's compact, dual-outlet power conditioner and isolation device—enhanced soundstaging, dimensionality, and depth. The 12-outlet aR12p was also found to be extremely effective, capable of delivering significant improvements in bass definition and depth, overall resolution, and soundstage depth. 162, 179, 186, 235

Nordost QBASE QB8 MKIII
$2299 ($1399 QB4)

Significantly upgraded recently and available in either four-outlet or eight-outlet versions. Improvements include a newly designed, dual PC-board configuration optimized to include enhanced trace sizes, further maximizing current flow and increasing separation of all ground connections. The QB8 improves transparency by removing a subtle opacity. A great clarifier of source material, it brought attention to low-level details, including micro-dynamics

estelon
Meet the new AURA
www.estelon.com

that had previously been obscured. NG, forthcoming

AudioQuest Niagara 3000 Low-Z Power Noise-Dissipation System
$3900
AudioQuest calls the products in the Niagara series "Low-Z Power/Noise Dissipation Systems." That name better describes its function—provide a low-impedance current source to your audio components that dissipates the noise that rides on all AC powerlines. Roughly midway in AudioQuest's Niagara line, the 3000 hits the sweet spot of performance and value. It's a big step up from the Niagara 1200, with two additional octaves of AudioQuest's Level-X differential noise filtering, one more bank of noise-dissipation circuits (for a total of three), and two high-current "Transient Power Correction" outlets that are ideal for amplifiers. MK, 342

Clarus Concerto PC
$4000
The Clarus Concerto is an unassuming, but well-made, rack-mountable module with a power switch and dimmer button on the front, and a clever and unique cable-support bar on the back that prevents the dreaded heavy-power-cable droop we all know and hate. The Concerto offers a total of eight outlets, separately specialized for high current, digital, and analog sources. Clarus' five-tier approach to conditioning lowers the noise floor without restricting dynamics. Reviewer Matt Clott's digital and analog sources benefited from what the Concerto provided: blacker backgrounds, more dynamics, and a cleaner canvas upon which to paint the music. MC, 306

AudioQuest Niagara 5000 Low-Z Power Noise-Dissipation System
$5900
All power conditioning products claim to do the same thing: lower the various current and ground noises generated by your power grid and the wiring in your house and system. The difference between the Niagara and most of its competitors is that the Niagara 5000 does this task demonstrably well, raising low-level resolution of detail and reducing background hash (making for a clearer, better-defined soundstage and more neutral timbre top to bottom) without choking off current delivery. With 12 outlets (four of which are high current), the Niagara 5000 is equipped to handle just about anything in your system—and to render audible improvements in every aspect of the stereo image. JV

Shunyata Research Denali 6000S v2
$6000
This AC conditioner from Shunyata takes what had been the state of the art in AC conditioning to a new level. It is based on noise-isolation technology that Shunyata developed for medical imaging equipment. The sonic result is quieter backgrounds, which allow for resolution of the finest micro-details. These low-level cues are vital to a sense of timbral and spatial realism, which are the areas where the Denali excels. The 6000S v2 is a shelf version with six outlets. Now available in an improved (but unreviewed) v2 version. RH, 272

Furutech Pure Power Distributor
$8850 ($9950 optional Project V1 power cord)
Furutech's mysterious looking, CNC-machined cube of aerospace-grade aluminum alloy is described as "virtual black hole for EMI and RFI." The six-outlet distributor uses rhodium-plated GTX-D NCF duplex receptacles and Furutech's NCF technology throughout. Music took on a renewed vitality, and visceral immediacy–the recording sounding more than ever like hearing a live feed straight from the mixing board. It lifted NG's system to a new level of resolution imparting a soaring immediacy with more snap and image and soundstage dimensionality. Optionally coupled with Furutech's state-of-the-art flagship PC, Project V1, it redefined NG's system as the quietest it has ever been. NG, 337

Shunyata Research Everest 8000
$9900
Shunyata's new Everest 8000 is easily the company's finest effort yet delivering an entirely unprecedented level of performance. This eight-outlet conditioner in a vertical truncated pyramid chassis benefits not just from Shunyata's previous work on AC power for audio, but from technology developed by founder Caelin Gabriel for Shunyata's sister company, Clear Image Scientific. The XC power cord that connects the Everest to your wall outlet is no less impressive. The soundstage opens up with greater space and depth, with more vivid and tangible images, along with far greater resolution of air and space around those images. RH's reference. RH, 311

AudioQuest Niagara 7000 Low-Z Power Noise-Dissipation System
$11,000
The 81-pound Niagara 7000 is the brainchild of AC design engineer Garth Powell, whom AudioQuest hired and essentially gave him two years and carte blanche to design a new power device from scratch. Powell says the Niagara 7000 is not a power conditioner; rather, it relies on dielectric-biased AC isolation transformers to reduce distortion without reducing current to any component, including amplifiers. Essentially, the Niagara seeks to create a power bank for your amps so that it doesn't have to strain to grab voltage from the wall. The most immediate and salubrious effect of the Niagara was to offer a more controlled and refined performance. The treble is smoother and rounder with the Niagara. Overall, the Niagara is a fabulous piece of equipment that adds sheen and palpability to the music that are utterly addictive. JHb, 271

Audience adeptResponse aR12-T4
$11,600 (studio ONE powerChord upgrade, $2400/6ft.; Au24 SX powerChord upgrade, $4660/6ft.; frontRow powerChord upgrade $6300/6ft.)
Audience's aR12-T4 power conditioner represents a substantial improvement over its predecessors, so much so that it would be fair to say that it borders on an order of magnitude advance. This is a world-class device, deserving your full attention. Give one a listen—perhaps the 6- or 2-socket variety—but be prepared to buy it. If you are anything like GW, there is no chance it will come out of your system once it is in place! GW, 268

Synergistic Research Galileo PowerCell SX/SRX
$27,995 includes 6' SRX AC cable
As a skeptic about power conditioners, JHb was pleasantly surprised by the improvements in imaging and dynamics rendered by the Synergistic Research PowerCell. Unlike many of its brethren, the PowerCell did not appear to

limit current. Instead, it offers even blacker backgrounds and lowered grit and distortion. Particularly noteworthy were the smoother treble and improved suppleness of musical lines. As with all conditioners, however, auditioning the Synergistic in your own system is a must, as the quality of electricity varies markedly from home to home. JHb/JV, 287

INTERCONNECTS AND SPEAKER CABLES

Transparent Audio Link Interconnect, Wave Speaker Cable, Performance Power Cord

$100/1m pr., interconnect; $250/8ft. pr., speaker; $130/1m, power cord

The $100 The Link interconnect brings more than a taste of high-end interconnects to an entry-level price. Similarly, the $250 The Wave speaker cable is a bargain, offering superior tonality, wider dynamics, and a more open soundstage. The Performance Power Cord is also an extremely cost-effective upgrade, rendering wider dynamic expression, smoother timbres, and greater musical involvement. NG, 196

Moon Audio Silver Dragon V1 IEM Headphone Cable

$205/4ft.

The Silver Dragon V1 IEM headphone cable is a drop-in replacement for use with in-ear monitors where light weight and flexibility are important. The Silver Dragon IEM is a coaxial design using a 99.99998% UP-OCC stranded silver 26AWG center-conductor for the positive leg. The center-conductor uses the same Kevlar reinforcing as other Dragon cables. Available with various terminations to fit many brands.

Wireworld Equinox 8

$250/1m pr. unbalanced interconnect, $250/1m pr. balanced; $970/3m pr. speaker single termination, $1170/3m pr. bi-wire

Falling right smack in the middle of Wireworld's extensive Series 8 line, the Equinox is a good value. The interconnect offered a pleasingly rounded and warm presentation not unlike that of Cardas Clear Light, while the Equinox 8 speaker cable was very similar to the Cardas Clear Sky in sonics. Excellent hum and noise rejection. RD, 236

Kimber Kable Hero

$296/1m pr.

Yielding only a tiny bit in sheer control, ultimate top-end transparency, and inner detailing to PS' reference Kimber Select KS-1021, Hero's bass lives up to its name, prodigious in amplitude and definition (rather better even than its pricier brother). This interconnect is either dead neutral or tilts a notch to the yang, with dynamics at once powerful yet finely resolved in an essentially grain-free presentation. PS, 138

WyWires Blue Series

$299/4' pr. interconnect (RCA or XLR); $549/6' pr. Speaker ($50/ft thereafter)

The first WyWires cable reviewed in TAS, the Blue is also one of the most pliable, easy-to-handle cables around. Its sonic signature is energetic, with a potent midrange, plenty of drive, and a slightly cooler, forward tilt. NG, 236

Cardas Iridium

$330/1.5m; $510/3m

The Iridium interconnect/speaker combination leaned toward being even in sonic distribution with a slightly warmer-than-neutral presentation with no enhancements and a slight reduction in low-level resolution and bass dynamics. If your system could use a bit fuller sound with additional bass authority in the power range and some reduction of upper-midrange and lower-treble energy, the Cardas Audio Iridium fits the bill. AJ, 274

Audience Ohno

$350/1m (+$70/m) RCA interconnect; $675/1m (+$150/m) Ohno III speaker

Audience's value line of Ohno cables runs counter to the idea that great wire always requires heavy jacketing and complex conductor geometries. Sonically these featherweights were quick and extended with well-focused imaging and dimensionality. Most significantly they were not additive, nor did they crimp dynamics. They were also easy to position for desktop use, offering an unerring sense of musicality without busting the budget. NG, 264

Nordost Purple Flare

$389/1m pr. interconnect ($70 per add'l half-meter pr.); $582/1m pr. speaker ($99 per add'l one-meter pr.)

Featuring Nordost's classic flatline configuration the Purple Flare is a rung below the current incarnation of Blue Heaven, yet it's a little trip to heaven on its own. It really shines in the midband with a driving, slightly forward energy that imparts dynamic liveliness to all genres of music. NG, 236

Wireworld Eclipse 8

$525/1m pr. interconnect; $2580/3m pr. speaker single termination, $2780/3m pr. bi-wire termination

Celebrating its 20th Anniversary, Wireworld has produced a bargain in its Series 8 Eclipse speaker cable and interconnect. Among Eclipse's many strengths are a sense of layered depth that brings inner detail alive, a broad dynamic envelope, and an ability to reproduce fine instrumental textures. NG, 238

Esprit Audio Beta

$599/1.2m pr. RCA; $774/2m, XLR interconnect; $1049/3m speaker

One of Esprit's budget models, Beta wire conveyed a midrange-centric sound. Vocal detail was clean and expressive, baritones and sopranos alike. Beta cabling was sensitive to small textural and timbral gradations. Its treble was somewhat rolled on top but had a smooth sibilance region, a factor that made it easily listenable. Soundstaging was convincing in width and dimensionality. Esprit Beta—finely tailored to a price point—performed superbly. NG, 289

Siltech Explorer 90i Interconnect and 90L Speaker Cable

$605/1m pr. interconnect; $1075/2m pr. speaker

Bringing Siltech quality and cache to an easily affordable price point makes Explorer an excellent upgrade cable for a mid-priced system. Its healthy midrange, fine articulation, and low-level reproduction make it a good deal. Dynamics and bass extension are also convincing. It could be a trifle sweeter in the treble, but few wires challenge it in this tier. NG, 226

Kimber Carbon 16 and18XL

$620/1m interconnect; Carbon 16 $2520/2m w/ SBAN banana speaker; Carbon 18XL $4000/2m w/ WBT connectors speaker

From Kimber's innovative new series, Carbon 16 and 18XL have a clean, lively, bold midrange character with excellent octave-to-octave tonal

balance. Neither laid-back nor aggressive, Carbon 16 has a very slight neutral-to-forward midband push—a signature that flatters vocals. A key strength is Carbon's unshakable image stability. As good as Carbon 16 is, however, Carbon 18XL, the pinnacle of the Carbon series, does everything just a little bit better. Its top end is airier and more open. The sound becomes more immersive, images more substantive and palpable. In sum, Carbon serves only one master—the music itself. NG, 322

Moon Audio Silver Dragon V2
$625/3' pr.
The V2 version of Silver Dragon, Moon Audio's top audiophile interconnect, uses an eight-wire braided geometry of solid-core 99.999% pure silver with a Teflon insulation. Connectors are top-notch—WBT Nextgen or Furutechs. Sonically, Silver Dragon is a model of smooth, rich midrange response—faithful to the real thing in its neutrality, color saturation, and fluidity. There's a satisfying mellowness to its character—one that doesn't exactly soften transients (there's plenty of snap and speed to go around) but does add a measure of overall warmth to the presentation. NG, 244

Kimber 8TC and 12TC
$650/2.5m pr. interconnect; $945/2.5m pr. speaker w/ SBAN banana plugs
Tilting a tad toward the yin, the 8TC has that elusive ability to remain musical no matter what is happening fore or aft, ideally mediating detail, liveliness, tonal neutrality, and dynamic contrasts within a very realistic, holographic soundstage. PS, 138, 146, 206

Synergistic Research Foundation SX Series
$699/1m pr. interconnect; $749/8' pr. speaker
JV wasn't expecting much—and certainly not this much—from Synergistic Research's immensely pliable, bargain-basement Foundation Series interconnects and speaker cables, which are far slimmer, lighter, and less sophisticated in design than their filthy rich relatives, the Galileo SRXes. But, trust him, sonically the Foundations come way closer than shouting distance to the Galileos. Indeed, these two SR lines have a great deal in common—neutral tone color, robust dynamics, spacious staging, high resolution. Oh, the more sophisticated Galileos are more extended at the frequency extremes, better focused, more finely detailed, and quieter than the Foundations; then again, they ought to be—they cost 20 times the dough. One of the best budget-priced wire JV has heard, one of his references, and a deserving TAS 2019 Product of the Year winner. JV, 304

Wireworld Silver Eclipse 8
$800/1m/, $1300/2m interconnect; $3680/2m, $5220/3m speaker, single termination
Wireworld's progression to Gen 8 includes a larger number of strand groups, an increased silver-over-copper conductor gauge, and more, but paradoxically what defines the latest generation of Silver Eclipse is a lack of spectacle, a less-is-more naturalism that brings forth a musical performance in all its authenticity. Overall transparency in general and inner resolution have improved. Transients are whip quick. Gen 8 opens space between images and sorts out low-level complexities like a tracker hound. But the overriding surprise is just how closely the mid-priced Silver Eclipse is now knocking on the door of flagship models. NG, 301

Clarus Cables Aqua
$870/1m pr. RCA interconnect; $2880/8' pr. speaker
Clarus Aqua not only satisfies audio expectations but does so at a reasonable price. It combines innovative conductor technology, ease of handling, and little in the way of sonic sacrifices. With its dead-quiet backgrounds Aqua establishes a sweet, even, honey-soaked midrange, delivered from an ever-so-slightly forward perspective. Further, its deep low-end brilliantly communicates the rich wood resonances of cello and acoustic bass. A cable that opens frontiers at accessible price levels. NG, 224

Harmonic Technology Magic Link Three
$950/1m pr. (RCA); $1000/1m pr. (XLR)
With improved clarity and articulation over Harmonic Tech's more affordable Pro Silway line, the Magic Link Two interconnect consistently yields smooth, extended highs, a delightfully full and natural midrange, and solid bass. You may find other pricier interconnects that excel in one specific area or another, but when it comes to overall system synergy, this is one cable you'll be "wearing" like a favorite pair of shoes.

Crystal Cable Micro Diamond
$1020/1m pr. interconnect ($560/add'l meter); $2300/2m pr. speaker ($660/add'l meter-pair)
Clean, composed, and transparent, the jewel-like Crystal Cable Micro Diamond cables offer an open soundstage where images snap into focus and music is conveyed with a turbine-like smoothness. Even some softness in the bass and a bit of forwardness in the treble don't diminish one of the most transparent cables NG has heard. Unique splitter rings allow easy change-out of terminations or bi-wire upgrades. NG, 164

Analysis Plus Silver Apex
$1219/1m pr. interconnect; $4399/8' speaker ($4849/8' with WBT0681spades)
Silver Apex projects one of the most open and natural voices NG has heard in a cable. It has a bold, ripe, textured midrange with plenty of inner detail. Neither romantically warm nor clinically cool, Silver Apex simply goes in the direction of the recording without commentary. Its sound is almost frictionless–a property that manifests itself as well-oiled speed, clarity, and fluency in reproducing cavernous acoustic spaces. A flagship-level cable that can stand its ground with the best of the best. NG, 301

Harmonic Technology Pro-7 Reference Armour Speaker and Armour Link III
$1350/1m pr. RCA interconnect ($400/0.5m add'l pr.); $4700/8' pr. speaker
Harmonic Technology's latest top-line cable offerings are highly communicative and musically insightful. Across the board Armour imparts a wide spectrum of tonal color, micro-shading, and dynamic contrast. There is not an element in its sonic resume that suggests hype or overreach. In

more general terms its tonal character is essentially neutral with the barest hint of a lighter complexion, a characteristic that often occurs in the company of quick transient behavior. What impressed NG's most of all was the HT Armour's ability to elicit dynamic gradients from recordings. A statement product that ranks with some of the most elite cables available. NG, 255

Cardas Clear Reflection
$1400/1m pr. interconnect (RCA and XLR); $3400/2.5m pr. speaker
A blend of the company's previous Golden Reference design and its current Clear technology Cardas Clear Reflection held its own when stacked up against more expensive cables and, accordingly, gets high marks for delivering good performance at a reasonable price. Reviewer KM was charmed by Clear Reflection's fluid, organized, detailed, and musically satisfying qualities. KM, 254

Siltech Legend 380
$1510/1.5m RCA, $1965/1.5m XLR interconnect; 380L, $3435/2.5m speaker; 380P, $1410/2m power
Tapping technologies from flagship Crown Series, Classic Legend 380 was sonically and musically striking for its refined, natural balance, and capable of producing crisply defined images and soundstage boundaries. It's a detail-focused cable, not pushy in terms of aggressiveness, but not wishy-washy or laid-back either. Low-frequency information was superbly presented, attaining a sonic trifecta of pitch definition, grip, and extension. Key was its excellent resolution of dynamic contrast, transient attack, and textural complexity. The tactile feel of customary Siltech finish remains the personification of quality. NG, 323

Snake River Signature
$1695/1m interconnect, RCA. $1795 XLR; loudspeaker $2095/3m; power cord $1545/2m
Signature has all the elan and character of a high-end traditionalist. Fluid, clean, confident, and texturally colorful, it portrayed music with a warmly relaxed approach. It evinced excellent balance across a wide range of criteria—namely micro-dynamics, harmonic sustain, and top-to-bottom extension. Treble character was particularly smooth and easy. Bass response was equally tuneful in pitch and dynamics. A cable that embodies authentic high-end audio values, dollar value, and performance. NG, 328

Clarus Cable Crimson
$1740 RCA/$2370 XLR interconnect; $5760 speaker
These are no fire hoses, snaking around your equipment, but unobtrusive and flexible wires whose terminations are beyond reproach. While these cables will not provide any extraneous fireworks or a vast soundstage, it is their very subtlety that eventually draws your attention. The Crimsons are as elegant sounding as they are svelte. They supply by high-end standards an economical route to superb sonics that is unobtrusive both in execution and fidelity. Seldom has JHb heard as grain-free a cable as the Clarus, which lives up to the Latin provenance of its name—clear and shining. JHb, 320

Furutech Reference III and Evolution
$1749/1.2m pr. Reference III XLR interconnect; $1529/1.2m RCA interconnect; $1750/2m Reference III speaker; $1460/1.8m Power Reference III cord; $978/1.2m pr. Evolution II XLR interconnect, $856/1.2m RCA interconnect; $787/2m Evolution speaker
Furutech uses cryogenically treated, ultra-high-purity, OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) single-crystal copper conductors in both its mid-priced Evolution and premium-priced Reference III audio cables. The top models offer better connectors, superior dielectric materials, and passive EMI-absorption filters made from GC-303 (an EMI-absorbent material developed by 3M Company). Furutech's cables have great transparency and purity, plus an uncanny ability to block out noise. CM, 173

Tara Labs Air Evolution
$1895 Interconnects, 1m, RCA (add $60, XLR); $2495 with EVO ground station system; speaker, $4200/8', bananas & spades, $4800/8' Air Evolution SP
Tara's Air Evolution opens wide the sonic window and conveys a rich, colorful tonality with clean textural shadings from the lowest bass to the uppermost treble. But the single most delightful impression is Air Evolution's soundstaging—full-on, uncropped, widescreen audio that touches the full dimensions of an orchestral concert hall. It portrays music with the same authenticity and naturalism encountered in the live experience. NG, 295

Nordost Frey 2
$1924/1m pr. interconnect ($400 per add'l half-meter pr.); $3189/2m pr. speaker ($687 per add'l half-meter pr.)
Occupying the sweet spot of Nordost's mid-priced Norse 2 line, the radically updated Frey 2 combines the high performance macro- and micro-dynamics that Nordost is famous for with richer mids and a brawnier, meatier bottom end that gives orchestral music more discernable ambience and weight. Of course, transient speed is on hand, but the Frey 2's are also a bit more controlled in the midbass and able to land a tighter, dynamic punch than most of the competition. In a word, the Frey 2s deliver flat out more fidelity to the live event. NG, 265

Crystal Cable Reference2 Diamond
$1950/1m pr. RCA interconnect; $43000/2m pr. speaker cable; $1250 1m power cord
Reference2 Diamond has finely wrought, jewel-like quality and style—more like something found at a Tiffany & Co. counter than an audio store. But don't be fooled by its lithe, thin, luxe looks, as Ref2 Diamond steadfastly refuses to be typecast. It has a slightly darker, richer, romantic sound, a bit forward but with an element of roundedness in the midrange that lends music weight and substance. An honest broker across the frequency spectrum, the

area that left NG almost (but not quite) speechless was its ability to elicit finer and finer gradations of timbral and textural color and contrast. It embodies a level of uncolored musicality that brings out the full potential of your system. NG, 342

Audience Au24 SX
$1999/1m pr. RCA interconnect; $2640/1m pr. balanced; $3616/2.5m speaker
Audience's latest flagship wire offers midrange weight and sweetness, vivid dynamic contrasts, excellent transient speed, sensitivity to delicate volume gradations, and a brilliance that casts light into the deepest corners of the soundstage, restoring air and lift to harmonics. A particular strength for all Audience cables is an often hard-to-achieve blend of tactile presence and back-of-the-hall reverberation. The Au24 SX strikes a fluid and natural balance of ease, articulation, and immersiveness. Flexible and easy to handle, too. NG, 269

Furutech Flux Cable Series
$2150/1.2m pr. RCA Lineflux interconnect; $2515/1.2m Silver Arrows II phono w/L-DIN or straight DIN plug; $3100 Powerflux AC
The Furutech Flux cables land on the speedy side of sound delivery. They are extremely transparent and detailed and probably best coupled with tubed electronics. A slight coolness pervades the cables, apart from the phono cable, which ranks among the best produced. The Flux cables transmit a wealth of detail but are never harsh. The quality of workmanship, as with all Furutech products, is stunning. The connectors are a pleasure to handle and use. JHb, 239

Analysis Plus Big Silver Oval
$2239/8' pr.
The Big Silver Oval is a speaker cable that brims with resolution and dynamic life. Constructed of pure silver over a stabilizing strand of OFC woven into AP's patented hollow-oval geometry, this is a cable you don't listen to, but rather listen through. Recorded music simply flows in an earthy and tonally authentic manner. Harmonics align; images and soundstage conform with no serious sonic missteps. And it's real-world affordable. NG, 215

VooDoo Stradivarius Amati
$2500/1m RCA pr.; $2650/1m XLR pr.
VooDoo's Stradivarius Amati interconnect offers a full-bodied, ripe, and colorfully detailed bounty of musicality. Tonally, it plays it straight down the middle with no obvious frequency hiccups. It has a forward-leaning character that lends soloists and vocals energy and presence. On a scale of warm-to-cool, Amati tilts ever so slightly to the cooler range—a subtle trait perceivable during high-drive wind or brass passages or upper-octave violin solos. Of note was its mid and lower midrange eloquence that brought to life the deep voicings and trailing resonances of cello, bass viol, and bassoon, or the throaty bloom of a tenor sax. The Stradivarius Amati knocks on the door of some of the best cabling out there. NG, 311

AudioQuest Thunderbird
$2900/$3900 1m pr. (RCA/XLR) interconnect; $5700/8' speaker
AQ's most recent addition to its Mythical Creature Series, Thunderbird imparts rock-steady neutrality across the octaves, forthright tonal balance, potent bass dynamics and pitch extension, a rich midrange, and a spirited harmonic liveliness in the upper ranges. Thunderbird's top end was one of the most expressive and continuous NG has yet experienced. Of note was an airier openness between images including low-level string transients. Thunderbird joins a very small cadre of cables that demonstrate exemplary transparency and convey superb musicality. NG, 338

Nordost Tyr 2
$3299/1m pr. interconnect; $6379/1m pr. ($1925 add'l 1m) speaker; $3684/1m power cord
A loom of Nordost's flat, FEP (fluorinated ethylene propylene) Tyr 2 interconnect and cable brings transparency, precision, purity, depth, texture, openness, and expansiveness to the listening experience. WG, 305

Audience frontRow
$3300/ 1m RCA /$3800 1m balanced interconnect; $5500 /2.5m speaker; $6440 5' power
The new statement wire from Audience proved worthy of its name. Led by a full-throated midrange, highly focused imaging, and a "you are there" transparency, frontRow summoned up the electric excitement of the live concert experience like few cables NG has experienced. Dimensionality, always a strength with Audience cabling, was even more well defined. Audience's top-notch wire, although not inexpensive, seemed boundless in its responsiveness, speed, and musicality. Highly recommended for systems of superior resolution. NG, 332

Wireworld Platinum Eclipse 8
$3600/1m pr. interconnect; $20,000/2m pr. speaker single termination, $20,200/2m pr. bi-wire termination
The summit of Wireworld's current thinking in this field is Platinum Eclipse 8, which sports newly refined cosmetics and heavy-gauge OCC silver conductors. There's no hype or spectacle here. Only a neutrally balanced presentation with just a pleasing gust of midrange warmth. Plus, it sets a symphonic soundstage with the precision of the staff preparing the dining room table at Downton Abbey. A "state-of- the-art" component. NG, 244

Kimber Kable Select
$4100/1m pr. RCA KS 1036 interconnect; $4100/1m pr. XLR KS 1136 interconnect; $30,400/2.5m/pr. KS 6068 speaker
Everything about this wire screams extreme. Its sophisticated construction uses varistrand silver and solid-core silver conductors. Sonically, there's a feathery light-footedness to its sound that doesn't so much add power as it does transient speed. By virtue of a bottomless well of dynamic contrast and tonal color the Kimber unearths energy and atmosphere in even the most familiar recordings. NG

Cardas Clear and Clear Beyond
$4360/2.5m pr. Clear interconnect; $7375/2.5m pr. Clear Beyond interconnect; $6700/3m. pr. Clear speaker; $14,000/3m pr. Clear Beyond speaker
This thick blue cable takes the patented technologies in Cardas cables to new heights. The balanced and single-ended interconnects and the loudspeaker cable are functionally identical in sound. But that doesn't mean a "house" sound; instead, Clear sounds

as close as you can get to having no sound. Eclipsed in performance only by Cardas' Clear Beyond. Where Clear used four conductors, Clear Beyond features eight, meticulously built up using multi-gauge strands in a "Golden Section" symmetrical tri-axial design. The larger strands are built upon this core until the inside of each conductor looks like a copper nautilus shell in cross section. Clear Beyond's eight conductors can be used to bi-wire your loudspeakers or for "shotgun" bi-wiring. NG, 226

WyWires Diamond Series
$4495/1.2m pr. RCA and XLR interconnect; $7995/6' pr. speaker ($750/ft thereafter)
Diamond is a Litz-wire air-dielectric design incorporating tiny, individually insulated strands of ultra-pure copper. Impeccably assembled it is also a cable of ultra-wide expressiveness and resolution. Its sound is settled, fast but not twitchy or brittle and utterly devoid of histrionics. In tonal character the Diamond edges toward the warmer side of the spectrum but only by a breath. It's not forward-leaning, but it doesn't flinch from hard rock sizzle or flesh-eating dynamics, either. Its approach embodies a softer sell that grows ever more multi-faceted, musical, and transparent. A cable for connoisseurs. NG, 264

Shunyata Sigma V2
$4500/1m RCA, $5000/1m XLR interconnect; $9950/2m speaker
This new V2 generation of Sigma interconnects and speaker cables performs considerably better than their predecessors. They can make a less-than-stellar system sound much closer to a super-system than we thought possible, so well did they tame underlying smear, grain, and glare. More subtle details emerged with ease; dynamic timing became more coherent and cogent; spatial details became more apparent; and musical flow and expression benefited from greater overall accuracy. KM, 331

Esprit Audio Eureka Phono
$5399/1.2m (DIN-XLR $5699)
If there is such a thing as a cable that speaks fluent "analog," Esprit has produced it. Exhibiting premium performance at every level, Eureka offers superb micro-dynamics, inner detail, fluidity, and timing, with a grasp of the intricacies of texture, timbre, and harmonic density that prove spellbinding. Expensive, yes, but capable of eliciting the finest from any top-notch LP playback rig. NG, 328

Purist Audio Design Dominus Luminist Revision
$5979/1m pr. interconnect; $12,480/1.5m pr. speaker
The all-silver Dominus is very detailed, very dynamic, very rich. Less open than Nordost Valhalla and darker in balance, it is also quieter, and because of its fluid-damped construction, virtually immune to floorborne and airborne vibration. JV

Analysis Plus Micro Golden Oval
$5999/1m pr. RCA or XLR interconnect
It's said that silence is golden, a notion reinforced by the low noise of AP's top-tier Micro Golden Oval interconnect. In this case silence is almost literally golden, as the cable has a coating of pure gold over its 18AWG copper conductors. Representing the most advanced version of AP's hollow-oval geometry, the Micro Golden Oval is as stirring, warm, resonant, and musically natural an interconnect as NG has heard, and must be considered a state-of-the-art contender. NG, 272

Esprit Audio Lumina
$6499/1.2m pr. RCA interconnect ($8249/2m XLR); $5995/2m pr. speaker
From the gleam of its connectors to its carbon-fiber accents, everything about Lumina oozes quality and opulence. Lumina communicated a faithful tonal balance that hewed ever so slightly to the richer, warmer-blooded, more laid-back side of the spectrum. Central to its character was the weight and power of its midrange response, which, if it were a bar of chocolate, would be of a darker variety, complex and savory. There was a density and foundation that backed every note, and it really sang on top, displaying a combination of sweetness and speed. Top-notch. NG,306

AudioQuest Dragon
$9500/1m RCA; $11,900/1m XLR
This interconnect does things RH had never heard from a cable—or more precisely, Dragon allowed the system to reveal previously hidden qualities. The midrange was simply luscious, liquid, and stunningly present and vivid. Vocals were completely untethered to the speakers and projected against an absolutely silent background. This had the effect of increasing the sense of presence and fostering the startling impression of the vocalist being in the room. Another aspect of Dragon that is unique is that it conveys more richly saturated tone color. The sound, from the lowest bass to the top treble, simply has greater body and weight. RH's reference. RH, 331

Nordost Valhalla 2
$9999/1m pr. interconnect ($1400 per add'l half-meter pr.); $12,759/1.25m pr. speaker ($1980 per add'l half-meter pr.)
These cables and interconnects reside near the zenith of audio reproduction, offering an almost unlimited palette of tonal colors, exceptional transparency, and explosive dynamics. The Valhalla 2's ability to reproduce layer after layer of orchestral detail is as engrossing as it is astounding, a testament to their speed and precision. The transient fidelity of the Valhalla 2 is also very difficult to quarrel with. Some listeners may prefer a more sumptuous presentation, but for that there is always the very summit of Nordost's line, the Odin cables. JHb, 254

Synergistic Research SRX
$12,995/1m pr. RCA and XLR interconnect; $29,995/8' pr. speaker cable; $10,000/6' power cord
Ted Denney & Co.'s latest creations, the tunable, actively shielded, multi-stranded, pure six-nines-silver SRX cables and interconnects, are the most sophisticated products Synergistic Research has developed since SR's original Galileo. They are also the best-sounding—by quite a fair margin. Sonically, what they reminded JV of (uncannily) are Crystal Cable's Art Series Da Vincis. At first, JV thought the SRXes might not be quite as low in noise or as high in neutrality and "completeness" as the phenomenal Da Vincis, which literally set the gold standard in these regards, but after installing a complete loom of SRX in his MBL system he's no longer sure. Though these two outstanding cables sound remarkably

similar, there are still enough differences in nuance and convenience between them to make your choice more a matter of system compatibility and user taste than absolute sonic excellence. There is this, as well: The SRXes are considerably less expensive than the Da Vincis, if that makes a difference to folks buying at these exalted prices. One of JV's references, and the 2022 co-winner of TAS Cable of the Year Award. JV, 333

Transparent Audio XL Gen 6
$13,000/1m pr. balanced interconnect; $20,000/8' pr. speaker
These interconnects and speaker cables can be set to match the loads of specific components, and the end results are clearer and more revealing than both the previous-generation Transparent and virtually all of the competition he's had the opportunity to audition. Even if you are a cable atheist or agnostic, you should really audition the Generation 5s. AHC, 264 (new Gen 6 not reviewed)

Transparent Audio Opus Gen 6
$15,000/1m pr. RCA interconnect, $25,000/1m pr. balanced interconnect; $46,000/8' speaker
Jacob Heilbrunn found that Transparent's Opus interconnects and speaker cables were essential to getting the best performance from the Wilson XLF loudspeaker. Opus emphasizes tonal fidelity, spatiality, and low noise. JH said, "I have not heard a cable that delivered more resolute bass, more timbral accuracy, and more hall ambience than the Opus." JHb, 225 (new Gen 6 not reviewed)

Siltech Royal Double Crown
$18,100/1m interconnect; $34,985/2m speaker (WBT); $15,300/2m power cord
These silver cables, which are based on a 6-core Hexagon construction, deliver a purity of sound that truly is fit for a king. The Royal Double Crown does not deliver razzle-dazzle but a lustrous presentation that is cut from the same sonic cloth throughout the frequency spectrum. The Double Crown's lack of grain is remarkable. Without sacrificing detail or transient bite, it captures the natural warmth of a string quartet or orchestra, all set against a jet-black background. The low noise level of the cable means that instruments emerge naturally with an almost soothing quality to them. Bass reproduction is full and taut, helping to endow the music with rhythmic solidity and weight. Is there more to be had? The Double Crown is second from the top of the Siltech line, but the performance it provides should satisfy the most exacting audio connoisseur. JHb, 337

Echole Limited Edition
$19,500, 3' balanced interconnect; $23,500, 6' speaker cable; $16,000, 6' power cord
These exotic interconnects and speaker cables from Echole, sister company to Absolare, feature not just custom design and geometry, but custom metallurgy. With a solid-core conductor so thick it's almost a rod, the cables are heavier and less pliable than most. Although priced at the upper end of the spectrum, they deliver first-rate sound. Rather that presenting a specific set of sonic characteristics, they seem to lower the level of noise and coloration, allowing the rest of the components in the system to better reveal the music's beauty. Among the cleanest and most transparent cables RH has heard. RH, 280

Crystal Cable Art Series Da Vinci
$24,000/1m pr. interconnect ($14,400 per addl meter); $46,000/2m speaker cable ($15,000 per addl meter)
Crystal Cable's and Siltech's chief engineer Edwin Rijnveld's latest top-of-the-line creations, the Art Series Da Vinci wires, are the quietest components of their type that JV has ever heard. There are sound technical reasons for this: Edwin's Art Series Da-Vinci wires have a newly constructed dual-layer shield—one layer a mesh of pure G9 silver/gold-alloy strands, the other of pure MonoX silver—which provides verifiably wider immunity against EM and RF fields, lower ground impedance, lower inductance, much lower capacitance (three times lower than JV's reference Crystal Cable Ultimate Dreams), and lower current distortion. The improvement isn't only a matter of measurements on paper; it is as immediately audible as the shockingly deep silences of tape and optical-cartridge playback are—and fosters the exact same impression of neutrality, completeness, and higher fidelity. Da Vinci is a genuine step forward in cable, interconnect, and power cord design—not a different or more appetizing "flavor," but a lowering of the characteristic noises (and susceptibility to noises) that give wires their flavors. JV, 328

Nordost Odin 2
$29,499/1m pr. interconnect ($3250 per add'l half-meter pair); $39,599/1m pr. speaker ($5280 per add'l half-meter pair)
With the Odin 2, Nordost has taken an already formidable cable and pushed it into the stratosphere where it achieves dizzying levels of performance. Any lingering sense of aggressiveness in the treble that existed with Odin 1 has been utterly effaced by Nordost's latest effort. What emerges with the construction of this cable, which includes different terminations of the plugs and connectors, is a marvelously dynamic and pellucid sound that most of its competitors would be hard-pressed to surpass, let alone equal. Add tautness of the bass and solidity of imaging, and you have a real winner. This is an immensely impressive cable that will take the finest audio systems to another level of sound reproduction. JHb, 270

AudioQuest Dragon Zero/ Dragon Bass
Zero $34,100 8' pr. speaker; Bass, $26,100 8' pr. speaker
This new top-level speaker cable from AudioQuest is easily the best cable the company has ever made. Dragon Zero features AudioQuest's finest materials and technologies, including Solid Perfect-Surface silver conductors, Carbon-Based Noise Dissipation System, and the long-standing Dielectric Bias System. It is extremely open and dynamic, as though a lid were removed from the music. The sense of transparency in the midrange and treble, and of unlimited top-end extension, is stunning. Although the soundstage is highly illuminated, Dragon Zero doesn't sound bright or fatiguing. A reference-quality speaker cable. RH

DIGITAL INTERCONNECTS

Belkin Gold Series
$15/1m

Despite being ridiculously inexpensive, this cable was AT's reference for nearly two years. Though no longer the best USB cable available, in sonic and musical terms it continues to outperform and embarrass many alternatives, regardless of price. AT, 226

Straight Wire USB-Link
$60/1m, $72/1.5m

This well-made, great-sounding USB cable is a relative bargain, delivering outstanding dynamics, timbral fidelity, and transparency. AT, 226

AudioQuest Forest Ethernet
$89/1.5m

The inexpensive Forest is a worthy upgrade over generic Ethernet cables, delivering greater space and dimensionality, smoother timbres, and wider dynamics. RH, 240

AudioQuest Carbon USB
$179/0.75m, $229/1.5m

One of the go-to USB cables for computer-audio fans, the Carbon is neutral without sounding bleached, dynamic without sounding piercing, detailed without sounding analytical. AT, 226

Wireworld Starlight 8 Ethernet
$275/1m, $350/2m Ethernet; $1800/1m 110-ohm AES/EBU; $800/2m USB 2.0; $1000/1m HDMI

Don't believe that the wires that transmit data from one digital component to another can make a sonic difference? Wireworld Cable Technology's founder, David Salz, can demonstrate otherwise, with 25 year's worth of experiments utilizing his patented Cable Comparator methodology. Like the manufacturer's analog products, Wireworld's top Ethernet, coaxial AES/EBU, USB, and HDMI cables employ a unique DNA HELIX® geometry, with layers of flat solid-silver conducting elements oriented in parallel strands, as well as COMPOSILEX® 3 insulation to minimize signal loss and triboelectric noise. End plugs are robust. The result is a portfolio of digital data connections that are exceptionally quiet and neutral, suitable for use with the finest DACs, processors, and servers. NG, 283; AQ, 339

Straight Wire Info-Link AES/EBU or Coaxial Digital Cable
$480/1m, $650/1.5m

This reasonably priced digital cable offers a host of virtues, including high transparency to the source, spacious soundstaging, a treble that is open and detailed without sounding analytical, and wide dynamics.

Nordost Heimdall 2 USB
$599/1m ($120 per add'l meter)

Nordost's mid-line Heimdall 2 USB cable is capable of detail, body, texture, and spatial resolution. The Heimdall 2 is also characterized by very low levels of grain, with smooth instrumental and vocal textures. KM, 261

Clarus Cable Crimson USB
$660/1m

The Crimson USB nails the midrange of the musical spectrum with fullness of body, warmth, transient speed, and an overall honesty that calms and relaxes the ear. Its light touch with difficult-to-capture vocal sibilance was excellent. A terrific upgrade cable (a standard-setter in this range) for nascent and skilled computer-audio fans alike. NG, 254

AudioQuest Diamond USB
$699/0.75m, $849/1.5m

This USB cable is simply revelatory in its combination of ease and refinement on one hand, and resolution and transparency on the other. Although capable of resolving the finest detail, Diamond USB has a relaxed quality that fosters deep musical involvement. RH, 221

Audience Studio ONE USB
$895/1m

This USB cable is simply sensational in every way. The studio ONE USB's clarity, dimensionality, and gorgeous timbre put it in a class by itself. It seems to have no signature of its own, but rather more transparently conveys what's coming from your computer. The dual-cable design separates the signal-carrying and power-carrying conductors. RH, 254 (formerly Au24 SE+ USB)

AudioQuest Diamond Ethernet
$1295/0.75m, $1995/1.5m

If you're using a generic Ethernet cable anywhere in your computer-audio setup, you haven't heard your system's potential. Even in a link such as a NAS drive to computer, AudioQuest's Diamond Ethernet renders a noticeable improvement in resolution and ease. RH

Wireworld Platinum Starlight 8 SPDIF
$1900/1m; $3400/2m RCA or BNC

Equipped with high-performance parts like carbon-fiber plugs and OCC-7N solid-silver conductors, Platinum Starlight gave the digital signal the luxury ride it was meant to enjoy—fast, smooth, and effortless. Suitable for top-flight systems, Platinum Starlight 8 ensures you won't miss a byte. NG

Kimber Kable KS-USB-AG
$2100/1m

Kimber established the widest, most detailed soundstage NG has heard from a USB cable. A cable with strong tonal and micro-dynamic contrasts, it was the embodiment of speed—with a hint of added top-end brilliance and extension—and so revealing only the finest DACs need apply. Candidly, the breadth of its performance would be lost in the entry-level world. NG, 254

Shunyata Research Sigma USB
$2500/1.5m

Shunyata Research has created a whole host of exceptional products over the years, but the Sigma USB cable just might be its greatest achievement. The Sigma USB delivers a breathtaking clarity that seems to strip away any trace of fog or veiling to more vividly portray instrumental tone color and texture. Timbres are simply more vivid and real sounding, an impression amplified by the Sigma USB's stunning resolution of space and air around instrumental outlines. The Sigma USB is also outstanding dynamically, sounding quick and clean, but not etched or fatiguing. RH

Shunyata Research Omega Ethernet
$3000/1.5m

Shunyata's Omega Ethernet cable is expensive, but worth it. The cable is built to extremely tight tolerances, and features Shunyata's patented technologies including a module that reduces common-mode noise, along with high-purity copper and silver conductors in the company's own geometry. Terminations are an all-metal design from Germany for superior isolation from outside noise. The sonic result is a dramatic lowering of the noise floor, and with that reduction, greater resolution of fine micro-details that bring an unprecedented level of realism to streamed music. RH

Shunyata Research Omega USB
$3500/1.5m
This USB cable is much better than any other USB cable RH has heard. It is so good it may even be the most outstanding product Shunyata has produced—and that's saying something. Omega simply doesn't have the "chalky" midrange and treble that plagues USB interfaces, replacing that graininess with smooth liquidity. Dynamics are stunning, and the bass extends to the netherworld. RH

POWER CORDS

Wireworld Stratus 7
$160/2m
Offering competitive performance with elite power cords costing many times their price, the Wireworld Stratus 7 have a defiantly flat profile, and are lightweight and available in color choices. Another major factor in the Stratus' favor—they are pliable enough to negotiate corners. NG, 208

Shunyata Research Venom V14
$175/1.75m
Shunyata's entry-level is a quantum leap over the standard, no-name cord. Flexible and UL-approved, Venom 14 adds transient pop and image stability, opens the soundstage, and peels away the soft veiling that lowers transparency and resolution.

Ethernet Audience forte f3 powerChord
$250/1.75m
Sheer excellence in the entry-level power-cord bracket, the Audience forte f3 is a definitive winner. It will lift the performance of any system, as it lowers the noise floor, improves transient attacks, and permits a wider expression of dynamic range and low-level detail. The hot tip is opting for the Audience's forte V8 Power Strip; then this cord will be included. NG, 311

Transparent Audio High-Performance Power Cord
$360/2m
The $320 High-Performance Power Cord (HPPC) is a vast improvement over stock AC cords and might be the most cost-effective upgrade possible in an entry-level system. Recently updated. NG, 196

Kimber Kable PK-10 Ascent
$564/2m
Years ago, Kimber Kable's original PK10 Palladian was a jaw-dropper, with revelatory soundstaging, dimensionality, and openness. The PK-10AG picks up where the Palladian left off, but in a more malleable, far less costly package. It has a rich dense midrange with an emphasis on soundstage depth. Bass extension and sustain earn high marks. It provides a rich, heavy, even slightly overripe (depending on your system) beat but is nicely detailed and uncompressed. NG, 208

Shunyata Research Venom V10 NR, and V14 NR Digital Power Cables
$600/1.75m; $400/1.75m
Advancements in its popular Venom line led to the creation of the NR Series (NR signifying noise reduction). Still modestly priced, NR power cords contain many of Shunyata's advanced technologies and custom-manufactured parts, including electrostatic shields to reduce radiated noise. The Venoms are Shunyata's lowest price power cables with built-in CCI filters that measurably reduce power-line noise generated by components. In the areas of instrumental timbre, sensitivity to micro-dynamics, and overall tonal refinement, the NR power cords were a clear improvement over Venom HC cords. The results were especially transformational when the cords were paired with Shunyata's own power conditioner, the Hydra Delta D6, as a complete system. NG, 305

Audience powerChord Forte f5
$699/1.75m; Forte f5 w/ Super Charge $899/1.75m
The Audience powerChords offer bass clarity, weight, and pitch resolution that place them at or near the top of the affordable-power-cord pack. Except for a slight treble congestion and somewhat laid-back overall presentation, there is little deviation from tonal neutrality. NG, 208

VooDoo Infinity Digital/ Power/Air Spectra PC
$850–$1050/6'/$2300/6'
Compared with stock power cords, going full VooDoo is a little like squeegeeing the windows and grabbing a dustbuster. The common perception of images sounding pinched or constricted is largely reduced. The interplay between musicians, orchestral sections, and the ambient space between them grows just a little more open and layered, even more so with Air Spectra. The VooDoo cords imparted a slight forwardness that tended to close the distance between the stage and the listener. They also have a cooler overall tonal character, leaning toward a more clinical interpretation of the music. Transients were quick and dynamics very good. Bass response overall was well extended, controlled, and timbrally exacting. NG, 284

Furutech DPS-4.1
$1680 (Bulk cable sold by the meter, $480 per meter)
Everything that goes into DPS-4.1 can be found directly online or through a dealer network. The parts are available to home users who are interested in finishing their own custom lengths and terminations, and who are handy enough with a crimping tool and a soldering iron to complete the task. The home assembly approach of the DPS-4.1 may not be for everyone, but the finished product performs on a par with some of the top contenders, at a considerable savings. NG, 317

Audience Studio One powerChord
Studio One MP powerChord, $1881 for 5'; Studio One LP, $1662 for 5'; Studio One Full Power, $2634 for 5'
The new Studio One version of Audience's already superb Au24 AC cords render an across-the-board sonic improvement. Studio One brings to the table new connectors with higher-quality metallurgy and lower-mass terminations. Moreover, Audience now offers the Studio One in three versions, low-power for DACs, preamps, and phonostages, medium-power for lower-powered integrated amplifiers, and high-power for power amplifiers. Each delivers a low noise floor, neutrality, an almost preternatural sense of recorded space and ambience and seemingly effortless flow and immediacy. Last but not least, these cords are among the most flexible available, very handy for angled runs. NG, 219, 245

Shunyata Research Alpha XC
$2300/1.75m
The Alpha XC power cord may be less than half the price of Shunyata's flagship Sigma but you wouldn't know that from listening to it. The XC delivers blacker backgrounds, enhanced textural density, smoother treble, and greater resolution in a flexible and sanely priced power cord. RH

Harmonic Technology Magic Power OCC Silver III AC 10
$3100/1.5m
Designed for use primarily with front-end components, the Silver III AC 10 delivers tremendous clarity, smoothness, and definition across the entire frequency spectrum, and does so without constricting dynamics or softening the treble. A built-in noise filter acts as an AC conditioner to remove line noise. SK

Shunyata Research Sigma V2 NR
$3500/1.75m
Shunyata's new Sigma NR AC cords raise the bar in performance in the category. Even compared with Shunyata's reference-grade Alpha, the Sigma delivers a quieter background, a more richly detailed soundstage, and greater dimensionality. Each cable behaves like a mini-power conditioner by incorporating noise-filtering technology. SSc, 311

AudioQuest Dragon AC
$4500/1m, Source–$5500/1m, High Current
In Jacob Heilbrunn's view, these AC cords are very much the best of the power products that AudioQuest makes. Though he greatly enjoyed the AudioQuest Niagara 7000 Low-Z Power Noise Dissipation System, he feels that these power cords have even more of an immediate sonic impact. Compared with the towering prices of some top-notch rival power cables, the AudioQuest Dragon Source and High-Current wires are also something of a steal. They are remarkably effective products that anyone interested in experimenting with power cords should consider. JHb, 291

VooDoo Cable Phoenix/ Dragon/Tesla
$4900/$3750/$3200
These top-end power cords are made from a mix of exotic materials and construction techniques. MC found that the VooDoo power cords produced an instantly apparent increase in resolution and separation of instruments. These improvements are due in part to a lowered noise floor and improved conveyance of speed and articulation. In addition, the system's electronics seemed to get a boost in channel separation. The improved sense of resonance and timbre in the bottom end clearly comes from that lowered noise floor in conjunction with an improvement in phase coherence. That the VooDoo power cables resulted in a profound improvement in almost every aspect of MC's system is flat fact—incontrovertible and astounding. MC, 334

Audience Au24 SX powerChord
$5060/6' ($4660/6' Neutrik)
Au24 SX represents Audience's latest wire geometry. Compared with its forerunner SE, SX presents an even lower noise floor—a virtual black palette of calm. The upshot is a soundstage of rock-solid stability and continuity, with more fully realized dimensionality and depth. A state-of-the-art cord. NG, 291

Shunyata Research Omega QR
$9000/2.0m (QR-s, $7500/2.0m)
Shunyata's Omega QR power cords use the company's VTX-Ag conductors in massively thick array (AWG4). It also features carbon-fiber headshells and CopperConn terminations. When used with Shunyata's Everest conditioner, the Omega offers seemingly unlimited current delivery, a dead-quiet noise floor, and a greater sense of instrumental presence. The Omega XC ($7000, not reviewed) adds noise-reduction technology right in the cable. RH, 312

Crystal Cable Art Series DaVinci
$14,500/1m ($8400 per add 1 meter)
Like Crystal's superb Da Vinci cables and interconnects, this flexible, beautifully made, silver-and-gold wire stuff costs an arm and a foot. But…if you got the money, it's very much worth it. This is the quietest, most transparent power cord JV has heard—gorgeous in color, unstinting in dynamics, unexceeded in resolution. JV, 333

ROOM TREATMENTS

ASC Tube Traps
$498–$2638
Tube Traps from Acoustic Sciences Corporation are indispensable to improving your system's sound. They can solve a wide range of acoustic problems with strategic placement and orientation. Boomy bass can be cured with a pair of 16" Full Rounds in the corners behind the loudspeakers. Placed along the sidewalls between you and the loudspeakers, Tube Traps kill unwanted sidewall reflections, prevent flutter echo, and aid in diffusion. A single Tube Trap in the center of the wall behind the loudspeakers can expand soundstage depth. There are lots of questionable acoustic products on the market, but Tube Traps are the real deal. New IsoThermal version (not yet tested) claims to double absorption below 60Hz. RH

Acoustic Geometry Room Packs
$580–$9519
Acoustic Geometry's Room Packs are extremely effective in taming room problems and improving sound quality. These affordable packages take the guesswork out of choosing what acoustic treatments your room needs and where to position them. The components of the Room Packs are also available separately. The CornerSorbers ($999 per pair) remove bass bloat and increase definition and dynamic fidelity. Curve Diffusors ($399 each) improve soundstaging, articulation, and bass. A full Pro Room Pack 10 ($8619) can transform your system. RH, 290

Auralex Acoustics Studiofoam Wedges
Price varies
If you've logged much time in home recording studios, odds are that you've already seen Auralex Studiofoam Wedges in action. Studiofoam is highly absorptive, and therefore can be just the ticket for taming slap echoes or comb-filtering effects.

A/V RoomService Ltd. Metu Acoustic Panels and Corner Traps
Price depends on configuration
Although the set of Metus that came to JV—and that he now depends on—came in a particularly unattractive Fudgsicle brown, these wall-hanging, cloth-faced, rectangular acoustic panels (mounted to wooden backboards) and cloth-faced corner traps can be precisely color-matched to your paint scheme or be made to look like framed art of any kind (from posters to paintings). Designed by Norman Varney, who did the acoustical treatment of Robert Harley's previous room, they are the real deal—precisely calibrated room treatments that use a patent-pending adjustable diaphragmatic/sound absorptive technology to reliably reduce all sorts of colorations. JV

RPG Diffusor Systems B.A.D. (Binary Amplitude Diffsorber) Panels

Price varies

RPG's B.A.D. panels are thin absorptive diffuser panels that can help tame problem room acoustics without quashing dynamics or swallowing midrange and high-frequency details. The design of B.A.D. panels is deceptively simple, but their effects can be remarkable. In rooms treated with B.A.D. panels, speakers often exhibit lower coloration, more focused imaging, and deeper soundstages.

Stillpoints Aperture II Panels

$960 each (all color combinations)

These 2' x 2' panels (four to six are recommended) do wonders for soundstage depth, image focus, detail resolution, and midbass clarity. They can be positioned freely or mounted on Stillpoints' dedicated stands that can hold up to three panels. A pair of stands, each supporting three Aperture panels and positioned just outside and in front of the speakers, renders a significant increase in soundstage depth, image specificity, focus, air between images, and soundstage symmetry. RH

Shakti Hallographs

$1195/pr.

Master of the inexplicable, Shakti's Ben Piazza has followed up on his magic "Shakti stones" with yet another impossible-to-explain-but-effective-as-claimed item, the Hallographs. With direct-radiating or omni speakers, these large, rotatable, free-standing, tuning-fork-shaped items work some kind of voodoo when placed in the corners and/or to the sides of a room, masking chaotic wall reflections and "clarifying" the soundfield (just as Shakti says they do). Indispensable. JV

SteinMusic H2-Plus Acoustic Harmonizer

$2458 (package of 2 including stands)

The brainchild of an immensely likable, utterly sincere, and wholly devoted German music lover, Holger Stein, the H2 Harmonizer System is yet another impossible-to-explain room treatment that works—in this case, markedly increasing three-dimensionality, better "disappearing" loudspeakers, widening the soundstage, enriching tone color, and heightening transient energy, top to bottom, to an extent that's kinda incredible. To make its magic the H2 boxes use ruby (and other) crystal materials (to which a small amount of current is applied) in concert with various "stones" and wall appliances. Magic it may well be, but the differences between "before" and "after" aren't subtle, are repeatable, and are finely adjustable to taste. JV

Synergistic Research ART System

Price varies

This amazing, expandable system of wall-mounted and floor-seated Helmholtz-like radiators (the eldest form of acoustic treatment) from SR's Ten Denney predictably enriches timbres, clarifies detail, and tightens images without constricting the soundstage. As far as JV can tell—and he's had the ARTs for years—they have no downside. Indeed, along with the Shakti Hallographs and Stein Harmonizers, the ART (Acoustic Room Treatment) System is one of the most effective passive room treatments he has used. Like the Shaktis it has become an indispensable tool without which his listening room simply doesn't sound "right"—and music played back in it doesn't sound as realistic, expansive, and delicious. JV

Synergistic Research Atmosphere Infinity/UEF Room Treatment

Infinity, $3495; UEF Dots, $295/10-pack; HFT, $299/5-pack

Synergistic's latest twist on Helmholtz-like radiators are HFT thimbles and UEF dots that "ring" salubriously in response to a signal emitted by Synergistic's active Atmosphere Infinity Tuning Module. The combination of module, HFTs, and UEFs really does dramatically change the acoustic of your room in completely predictable, user-selectable ways. Further tweaks include UEF acoustic panels ($549/4-pack) and the Black Box, which together make for a uniquely ingenious and effective room-treatment system. This is one you've gotta hear. JV, 280

ACCESSORIES

AcousTech Electronics Stylus Force Gauge

$79

Getting the most out of any turntable requires accurate vertical tracking force—and yes, kids, you can easily hear slight changes. Not only is AcousTech's new gauge a relative bargain; it is small, has a backlit display, is incredibly easy to use, measures weights from 0.001 to 5.000 grams at the height of an LP's surface, and is said to be accurate to within ± 0.002 grams.

Aesthetix ABCD-1MC Cartridge Demagnetizer

$230

This battery-operated device sends a special signal through your moving-coil cartridge, removing stray magnetism in the coils. Used every two weeks or so, the ABCD-1 will restore tone colors and soundstage clarity. For use only on moving coils.

Analogue Productions The Ultimate Analogue Test LP

$39

Amazingly well-conceived as well as manufactured to the highest standards, The Ultimate Analogue Test LP is the new reference in test discs. It's loaded with useful test signals that are encoded with high precision, and the record is pressed on 180-gram virgin vinyl.

Apos Audio Ray 12AU7 Tubes

$179 per pair

At the end of July 2023, the international retailer Apos Audio announced they would begin selling their own brand of tubes, beginning with the 12AU7. Dubbed "the Apos Ray" line, these 12AU7 will be sold in matched pairs. According to Apos these tubes are new, vigorously tested, hand selected, and only 4% of the total output makes the grade. The Apos Ray 12AU7 tubes are ideal for any application where you require a 12AU7 that has more mutual transconductance than most other 12AU7 tubes, especially vintage NOS samples. Priced competitively with other premium tubes that are currently available, the Apos Ray 12AU7 offers a fine new alternative for those who require a carefully tested and selected high-performance tube. SS, forthcoming

AudioQuest BPW Binding-Post Wrench

$17.95

AudioQuest's binding-post wrench, featuring durable metal socket-inserts, eliminates the need for a bulky socket set. This compact double-ended nut driver, small enough to slip into a shirt or pants pocket, fits 7/16" and ½" binding posts. Essential for tightening down speaker cables to speakers and amps.

AudioQuest Conductive Fiber Record Brush
$29.95
This new and improved version of AudioQuest's ubiquitous carbon-fiber wonder has "ideal conductivity from the Carbon Fibers." On first acquaintance, the only change JV noted was that the brush feels different (lighter and a bit flimsier) than the original. But who cares? You're going to buy one; JV's gonna buy one; anyone who listens to vinyl is gonna buy one. The thing is indispensable. JV, 274

AudioQuest JitterBug
$69
This little device looks like a miniature plug-in DAC but fits between a DAC or USB cable and a USB jack on a computer, DAC, or music server. Its mission is to reduce jitter and isolate the computer from the DAC. Judging from its sonic effects, the JitterBug does just that, offering a smoother treble, deeper soundstage, and more relaxed and natural presentation. A no-brainer recommendation for the asking price.

AudioTools App
$20
If you've had a desire to test, tweak, or optimize your music system, the tests included in the AudioTools App will make your job easier. All this ergonomic elegance can be had at a price that makes stand-alone test gear almost obsolete.

Avid Level 45 45rpm Adapter and Bubble Level
$100
This two-piece kit combines a precision machined-steel 45-rpm adapter with a high-quality bubble level. The level sits atop the 45rpm-adapter, which together weigh 180 grams—the same as a high-quality LP for accurate leveling.

A/V RoomService Equipment Vibration Protectors
$99/each EVP 2"; $199/each EVP 4"
Don't confuse these unique two- or four- inch-tall pads with typical couplers like spikes and footers. EVPs are decouplers, and according to A/V RoomService their energy absorption properties are tested, known, neutral, and consistent. While the EVP might be decidedly unglamorous to the eye, when placed discreetly beneath a component it can make nearly any rig more musical. While the EVPs don't change the inherent tonal balance of a loudspeaker—they do restore a level of musical and harmonic complexity that makes a loudspeaker into a more satisfying version of itself. NG, 290

Block Audio C-Lock Connection Guard
$49–$149
Loose-fitting or sagging outlets? C-Lock is an outlet plate with an integral, adjustable "lock socket" system that clamps down on the male end of a power cord and draws the blades of the power cord fully and firmly within the receptacle. Suffice it say C-Lock works as intended. Like formal wear for the well-dressed system, it completes the chain of connections with panache. NG, 311

Blu-Tack Adhesive Putty
$10
The original acoustic putty and adhesive from Bostik of England that damps resonances and mechanically couples a compact speaker to the top plate of its stand. Sonically you'll hear tighter bass and improved image. Considered "a flexible semi-liquid that behaves like a solid" it also offers a safety bonus by preventing a stand-mounted speaker from being inadvertently toppled.

Caig DeoxIT
$34.95
Caig's DeoxIT has long been the go-to lubricant for cleaning, preserving, and conditioning all electrical connections. Packaged in a handy dispenser bottle with a little applicator-brush built into the cap, it can and should be used for any junction (short of an AC wall socket) where a metal connector (like the male RCA plugs of your interconnects) is plugged into a metal socket (like the female RCA plugs of your preamp or amp).

Cardas RCA Caps
$60 (set of 12)
Pop these RCA shorting plugs into your preamplifier's unused inputs and you'll hear a blacker background, more micro-dynamic detail, and an overall cleaner sound.

Chord Company GroundARRAY
$795 each
This set of cigar-sized cylinders terminated with an audio or networking connector plugs into unused jacks on your equipment to reportedly lower your system's noise floor by shunting electrical noise to ground. Plug options include USB A, RCA, DIN, XLR, BNC, RJ45, and HDMI. Used in an array across analog and digital components, the GroundARRAY increased the sense of air and space, and made fine detail more easily audible and distinct. RH

Clearaudio Strobo-disc and Strobe Light
$75 and $250
Featuring grooves that create the additional stylus drag necessary to accurately measure your turntable's speed—while at the same time doubling as a cartridge break-in device—Clearaudio's Strobo-disc and Strobe Light are great tools for the serious vinyl junkie.

Composite Products Carbon-Fiber Cones
$75 (3-Pack)
Made from layers of carbon-fiber cloth bonded into a solid with epoxy, the Composite Products Carbon-Fiber Cones are extremely stiff and well damped. Place a set under a component to reduce vibrations.

Critical Mass Systems CenterStage2M
$545-$795
Constrained-layer damped footers that lower the noise floor and improve the sonics of every component JV has tried them under. JV, 330

Dr. Feickert Analogue Universal Protractor
$250
Feickert's invaluable protractor includes a white disc with markings on each side—for Baerwald and Lofgren geometries and 50 and 60Hz strobe patterns—an impressively machined aluminum measuring device that turns accurately measuring stylus to pivot distances from hair-pulling frustration to child's play, and a step-by-step instruction booklet that makes fine-tuning your cartridge's geometry a remarkably easy procedure.

DS Audio ION-001 Ionizer
$1800
A free-standing ionizer (like an electrically powered Zero-Stat) that continuously floods the surface of your records with

ions and cations to eliminate the static charge on the vinyl, the ION-001 "smooths out" tracking by neutralizing static electricity. It also (and more importantly) somehow neutralizes timbre (in the sense of bringing tonal balance closer to colorlessly neutral top to bottom). A pricey but (if you've got the dough) worthit addition to any ultra-high-end playback system. JV, 309

DS Audio ES-001
$6000
That wizard of the optical cartridge, DS Audio's Aki Aoyagi, has produced an LP eccentricity-detection/correction device (which also serves as a record weight) that reads the concentricity of a record's run-out grooves via infrared light and shows you (by means of an active readout on a top-mounted LED screen) in which direction to nudge your LP so that it is perfectly centered on the platter. Of course, you need a spindle of a diameter that allows for some "play" to move your LP; if you don't have this kind of leeway, you will have to enlarge the spindle hole with a reamer (supplied with the ES-001). Either way, this is a breakthrough product from a company that seems to specialize in breakthrough products. Instead of searching for a tough-to-find Nakamichi auto-centering turntable/tonearm (whose otherwise decades-old sonics leave a great deal to be desired), you can accomplish the same result (and the same audible improvement in pitch stability and precise groove tracing) on any turntable of your choosing with this little marvel of optical technology. The ES-001 is a game-changer and a must-own item if you're deeply into analog. JV, 334

Fosgate Fozgometer II
$400
Adjusting for correct cartridge azimuth (axial tilt) is the bane of an audiophile's beleaguered eyeballs. However, the Fozgometer, the late Jim Fosgate's ingenious and fairly priced Azimuth Range Meter, is designed for even the most astigmatic among us. Used in conjunction with the Ultimate Analog Test Disc LP [Analogue Prod: AAPT-1], it diagnoses azimuth irregularities by accurately reading channel separation and channel balance, as well as signal direction. Nicely finished with a large readable meter. Operation is a snap.

Furutech NCF Clear Line
$275
Described as an "audio-grade passive AC optimizer," the NCF Clear Line plugs into any vacant receptacle on either a power distributor or wall outlet. The difference it makes is one of focus and air between images. It nails the perimeter around sung notes and the clarity of the space between them, resulting in a more definitive sense of layering and transient immediacy. Sensible, cost-effective, and, once heard, difficult to part with. NG, 317

Furutech GTX DR NCF AC Duplex Wall Outlets
$281
Furutech has taken the humble outlet and run it through a gauntlet of refinement far beyond what most of us can imagine. Performance-wise, there's no doubt that the Furutech removed a layer of low-level grunge from the sonic window, reducing noise across the soundstage. Like a sonic dust cloth, images were more tangible and retrieved with greater clarity. while the Furutech GTX is not cheap, its uncompromising quality and high performance make it seem a small price to pay. NG, 290

Groovetracer Reference Subplatter
$275; Delrin platter, $350; record weight, $125; universal counterweight, $189
These beautifully made, highly effective tweaks for Rega turntables add more ambience, air around and between instruments, three-dimensionality, tonal accuracy and richness, as well as dynamic weight and impact to vinyl playback. WG, 309

IsoAcoustics zaZen II Platform
$229
Among the latest offerings to join the IsoAcoustics line, zaZen represents a ground floor solution in a segment where the sky is the limit. On a shelf or sideboard, IsoAcoustics zaZen II integrates almost invisibly in an existing den or living room. Sonically high achieving, it provides an excellent foundation for smaller, budget systems. Particularly impressive was the way it steadied and focused large groups of choral singers while allowing greater individuation of voices. On the key issues like image stability, lower congestion, and resolving power, the zaZen II gave this listener more than a glimpse of the transparency that intelligent isolation can impart. NG, 334

Jolida Foz XT-R
$475
Inserted between the output of the phonostage and before the input of the preamplifier, the Foz gives you the chance to adjust the crosstalk of each channel separately and fine-tune it to perfection. Both soundstage width and depth improve with the insertion of the XT. A remarkably ingenious product, it deserves to be auditioned by pretty much anyone intent on improving analog playback. JHb, 270

Kate Koeppel Design Racks
Price varies
The lack of LP storage solutions that were both functional and elegant drove designer and record collector Kate Koeppel to manufacture a line of her own. Made of heavy-duty yet smooth multi-ply high-grade European birch, her creations, all handcrafted by California artisans, run from record and CD racks to LP collection dividers—you can arrange as you please: alphabetically, by genre, by label, etc. Koeppel can also design and create custom storage solutions to meet your needs. Perhaps best of all, you can forget about rickety plastic crates—unless you're out digging for more vinyl. JM, 270

Levin Record Brush
$99–$175
The ultra-expensive Levin is the ne plus ultra of hand-held record brushes. Handmade in Germany from your choice of exotic woods (thus the price range), the Levin is constructed from natural horse or goat hair with old-world techniques. To hold this oversized luxurious-feeling brush in your palm is to want one. RH

Lyra SPT Stylus Cleaner
$60
Mission accomplished. Puts the fluid where it belongs. Lyra's formulation scrubs each precious stylus clean without globing on and ultimately reducing the compliance of the cantilever. A tiny, angled brush is included.

Magna Riser Ascension I Magneplanar Speaker Stand
$299
These beautifully made stands, with powder-coat finish, are designed exclusively for Mag-

Raidho Acoustics

THE TD6

This masterpiece of a loudspeaker is built by hand in Denmark by master craftsmen. The legendary ribbon tweeter and diamond coated drive units are not only our own creation, but also built to the highest standards in our own factory in Denmark.
Raidho aims to pay homage to the legacy of the invention of the dynamic drive unit in Denmark in 1915.
www.raidho.dk

Quote

SOUNDSTAGE GLOBAL AT THE HIGH END SHOW 2022:

"The soundstage was immense and enveloping. This system offered staggering levels of detail, slam, power, and bandwidth, while dynamic range was off the scale. Once heard, never forgotten."

Quote

ENJOY THE MUSIC AT THE HIGH END SHOW 2022:

"Even the crossover is extreme with the elements connected using Nordost cable behind the board, not something I've ever encountered before. The sonic result was suitably room-filling and the bass was on the next level even by the standards of high-end luxury audio."

Quote

HIFI PIG AT THE HIGH END SHOW 2022:

"A truly stunning speaker, they did not disappoint during listening. The stand out track was a live version of Kraftwerk's 'Radioactivity'. Electronic music showed of the speed of the drives and the sound even seemed to come from around and behind you when sat in the sweet spot in the GamuT chair."

nepan speakers. With Magna Risers installed, everything that makes Maggies special is taken to a higher plane—that famous absence-of-a-box air, three-dimensionality, and soundstaging, that excellent imaging and realistic sense of instrumental and venue size and space, that top-to-bottom coherence and reach-out-and-touch-it "thereness," that uncannily realistic recreation of drums. Other qualities that Magnepans are often not often associated with, such as dynamic power and low-frequency extension and weight, are likewise elevated to new and unexpected levels. WG, 309

Marigo White 3mm Tuning Dots
$39 (set of 8)
These tiny, adhesive, constrained-layer resonance-control "dots" provide an effective bit of damping to tubes or signal connectors that may see airborne or floorborne vibration, even if isolated on stands. Also useful on the headshells of tonearms or, judiciously applied, on the top of cartridges.

Mobile Fidelity Rice Inner Sleeves
$20 (50-pack)
A precious collection of LPs is only as good as its scratch-free surfaces. Offered for decades, Mobile Fidelity's familiar rice paper-style inner sleeves are renowned for their anti-static properties that avoid drawing dust and grit into the delicate grooves. They remain the archival sleeves to beat.

Mobile Fidelity Record Brush
$20
The Mobile Fidelity record brush is the next best thing to a record cleaning machine. It works with dry records for a quick dust-off before dropping the stylus, as well as with a liquid for deeper cleaning. The well-designed handle makes it easy to use, and the Mobile Fidelity Record Brush is inexpensive, to boot.

Mobile Fidelity LP#9 Stylus Cleaner
$25
This "brush-in-a-bottle" cleaner effectively removes crud on your stylus and is so easy to use that you'll get in the good habit of cleaning the stylus before playing each side.

Onzow Zerodust Stylus Cleaner
$69
Not a fluid or brush-based stylus cleaner, the Zerodust uses a polymer bubble that gathers debris onto its ultra-soft surface. A winning alternative for those concerned with overusing liquid cleaners that can leave residues and build up over time. Zerodust can be cleaned with tap water and a magnifier is included.

Prather Design LP Racks
$20–$897
This extensive line of beautiful handmade wooden LP racks run the gamut from a single "now playing" LP holder to storage for a full collection. Whichever you choose, the craftsmanship and quality are superb. RH, 284

Q-Up Tonearm Lifter
$50
A little device that you attach near the pivot of your tonearm to automatically lift the stylus off the record at the end of an LP side. A boon to the analog lover—and the lazy.

Ramar Record Brush
$340
Headquartered in Germany, Ramar has elevated the prosaic brush into something much more, well, *über*-luxurious. The two-piece case is made of solid wood, milled from a single wooden blank, then impeccably oiled and finished. But it's the brush itself where the magic occurs—a unique mixture of carbon fibers and goat hair with a large surface area that effectively returns LP surfaces to fresh-from-the-sleeve status. Included is a stylus cleaning wand that magnetically attaches inside the case. For the well-dressed analog rig this is one splurge that is more than worth it. NG, 326

Schiit Loki Mini+ EQ
$149–$159
The Loki Mini+ is a four-band (20Hz, 400Hz, 1.2kHz, 20kHz), line-level EQ device intended for use as a tone control to adjust the broadband balance of recordings. No matter how neutral your system may be in whatever sense you interpret that concept, no recording will have been monitored on a system that matches yours exactly, so it is inevitable that recordings will benefit from perhaps subtle but still meaningful adjustments, case by case. With minimal signal alteration outside the adjustable balance change, a price that is startling low, and convenient, easy operation, you can take control of tonal-balance adjustments in a way that will revolutionize your listening experience. REG, 324

Schiit Loki Max
$1499–$1549
At a considerably higher price than the Loki Mini+, but still reasonable for what it offers, the Loki Max is Schiit's ultimate line-level EQ device. Its six bands (20Hz, 120Hz, 400Hz, 2kHz, 6kHz, 16kHz) give detailed control of recording balance and even have some utility for speaker/room adjustment, though the Max is not intended for detailed room correction *a la* DSP room-correction programs. The Max has a remote control, so you can make adjustments on the fly from the listening position. The device is very carefully built and uses relay potentiometers for extremely precise channel matching and absolutely minimal signal degradation. It is top quality all the way and is effectively transparent, indeed. The ultimate answer for tone control, says REG. A modern-day replacement for the Cello Palette of yore. REG, forthcoming

Shakti Electromagnetic Stabilizer Stone
$175
Ben Piazza's Shakti Stones employ "proprietary noise reduction circuitry to absorb and dissipate electromagnetic interference (EMI) and radio frequency interference (RFI)." In other words, nobody's quite sure how they work, but work they do when placed over the transformers of amps, preamps, and other electronics, reducing noise and enriching timbre.

Shure SFG-2 Stylus Force Gauge
$20
Although ultimately not accurate as the best digital gauges, the classic "teeter-totter" Shure is simple to use, cheap, and does the trick very nicely.

Soundsmith Counter "Intuitive"
$49
The Counter "Intuitive" is a polymer damping ring designed for VPI tonearms that fits around the counterweight and allows for very fine, fully independent adjustments of tracking force and azimuth by simply moving the ring forward or backward, or by gently rotating it. A self-adhesive scale applied to the counterweight allows the user to mark settings for specific cartridges and VPI arm-wand combinations.

SoundStage! network BEST OF HIGH END 2016 SoundStage! Hi-Fi

SoundStage! network PRODUCTS OF THE YEAR 2019 soundstage.com

2022 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD Technology Breakthrough

GOLDEN EAR the absolute sound 2023 AWARDS

2024 the absolute sound EDITORS' CHOICE AWARDS

Lorem Ipsum

"I heard a spatial presentation that was indistinguishable from real life."
Robert Harley, Editor-in-Chief, *The Absolute Sound*, January 2015

BACH-SP

www.theoretica.us

SpeakerAngle
$1.99
A nifty app for your iPhone that sits atop your speakers and can tell you if they are identically toed-in, eliminating the need for tape measures. JM

SteinMusic Pi Carbon Signature Record Mat
$649
This paper-thin "mat" (it is, in fact, a sheet of handcrafted Japanese paper embedded with carbon fiber) may not look like it will work sonic wonders, but it does, smoothing out any remaining rough edges in LP playback and increasing the sense that you're listening to a sonic "whole" rather than a collection of parts. Things just sound more "continuous" (less jittery, discrete, and, well, phonographic) when the Stein Pi Carbon is in place. JV, 309

Stillpoints UltraMini V2, UltraSS V2, Ultra5 V2, Ultra6 V2, LPI V2
$150, $299, $839, $1079, $659
Whether deployed under preamps, power amps, DACs, or speakers, Stillpoints' isolation devices produced a significant improvement in the sound: specifically, in the resolution of low-level detail and the ability of the speaker to disappear into the soundstage. The Ultra Mini V2, UltraSS V2, Ultra5 V2, and Ultra6 V2 differ in the number of "pockets" of isolation mechanisms within the footer. The effect of more Ultra devices is synergistic; the more you add the greater the apparent gain. The LPI V2 applies Stillpoints technology to a record clamp, emulating the salutary sonic effects of vacuum hold-down. JHb, 265

Symposium Acoustics Fat Padz
$225 (set of three); $299 (set of four)
Kind of like Rollerblock Jr.'s in a single unit, Symposium's Fat Padz employ constrained-layer damping to turn resonant energy into heat. Ideal for supporting lightweight equipment like preamps and CD players.

Symposium Acoustics Rollerblock Jr.
$275 (3); $359 (4)
A set of Rollerblock Jr. gives you four top and bottom units and four tungsten-steel ball-bearings, which are then combined to make "Double Stacked" isolator/coupler sandwiches. Ingeniously combing tectonic and constrained-layer damping, the Rollerblocks are, when placed under even heavy components, among the most highly effective resonance-control devices on the market.

Townshend Audio Seismic Podiums
$1395-2695 (varies according to size)
Townshend Audio's unique take on speaker isolation proved irresistible. Supported at each corner of the platform by Load Cells—a height adjustable and damped spring system—the Podiums were essentially colorless, never insinuating themselves over the music. Any suggestion of sonic constraint or congestion simply went poof. The soundstage was liberated from a subtle opacity and veiling—a feat that resulted in wider colors, micro-dynamic gradients, and dimensionality. Images emerged and receded naturally, firmly rooted in space and proximity to adjacent players. Bass response, extension, and pitch flowed more freely. The Podiums become so fundamental to the listening experience that calling them mere accessories fails to give them enough credit. NG, 312

Vibrapods
$6 each
Vibrapods are small, flexible vinyl pucks that can transform a system. They're numbered by their weight-bearing loads: Put them under speakers and electronics and hear bass extension and smoother highs. At four for $25, who says great tweaks must be expensive? Just out, Vibrapod Cones—use them as standalone footers or combine with Vibrapods to get even more out of your system.

VooDoo Iso-Pod Isolation System
$349/set of 3; $449/set of 4
Comprising CNC-machined aerospace alloy discs suspended by zirconium ball bearings, VooDoo's three- or four-point isolation system reins in acoustic and mechanical vibrations and resonances and is a cost-effective way of tightening detail and illuminating imaging.

Wilson Audio Pedestal
$2400 (set of three)
Speaker-maker Wilson Audio's experience with the "game-changing" V-Material, developed for parts of its Chronosonic XVX loudspeaker, prompted the company to develop a component footer that incorporates the material along with a proprietary viscous-damping material, making it ideal for placement under preamps, amps, DACs, servers, and just about any component within its weight limit. The housing is made from non-magnetic stainless steel. Two models are offered, one designed for weights of 3–9 pounds (weight load per Pedestal), one for heavier components of 8–25 pounds (weight load per Pedestal). RH found the Pedestal extremely effective under his phonostage, clarifying the soundstage, improving transient performance, and smoothing timbres.

Xtreme AV Quicksilver Contact Enhancer
$90
This 100% silver contact enhancer has been cryogenically treated to produce the optimum conductive surfaces for audio signal connections. Works on RCA jacks, tube sockets, AC cords, and cartridge pins. Comes with a complete kit of cleaning tools.

BOOKS

The Absolute Sound's Illustrated History of High-End Audio, Volume Two: Electronics
Edited by Robert Harley
Nextscreen, LLC, 330 pp., $129.95
The follow-up to Volume One. This time the TAS staff tackles the history and highlights of high-fidelity electronics, with the considerable help of Nelson Pass, Bob Carver, and Scott Frankland. If you want to know how electronics have evolved from the acoustic era to today's astonishing high end, and who was behind this evolution, you'll find all the milestones and celebrated personalities in the pages of Volume Two. JV

The Complete Guide to High-End Audio, Sixth Edition
Robert Harley
Acapella Publishing, 596 pp., $44.95 (paper). hifibooks.com
First published in 1994, now in its thirtieth year in print, *The Complete Guide* has been newly updated and expanded in its Sixth Edition to include advances in digital, personal, and desktop audio (among many, many other things), Robert Harley's *Complete Guide* remains the most useful book about high-end audio ever written. A masterwork by a past master. JV

YOU'VE NEVER HEARD IT THIS GOOD!

Three Days Of Great Music and Incredible Sound.

APRIL 12-14, 2024 • CHICAGO

RENAISSANCE SCHAUMBURG HOTEL & CONVENTION CENTER

AXPONA

AUDIO EXPO NORTH AMERICA

AXPONA is where you can discover the latest gear from the brands you love to create your ultimate listening experience.

Feast your ears on hundreds of exhibits, with more than 200 listening rooms, to really experience what the newest audio products can deliver, including turntables, loudspeakers, headphones, vinyl, electronics and accessories.

"T+A had a great show with good traffic that exceeded our expectations and plenty of serious buyers. Many consumers were asking 'where can I buy?' And we saw dealers from all over the country. AXPONA has become the North American show for us."

Dave Nauber,
Chief Executive Officer for T+A

TICKETS ON SALE NOW! GET YOUR TICKETS AT AXPONA.COM!

For information on exhibiting, contact Mark Freed:
mark@jdevents.com, 203-307-2688

Streaming Sponsor

qobuz

Dreams So Real

The Unique and Colorful Legacy of Carla Bley

Larry Kelp

Quotes drawn from interviews with Carla Bley over the years, starting 1981 at Hamburger Mary's in San Francisco, with second husband Michael Mantler supplying the business details. And Carla supplying her trademark unique fashion and hairstyle.

PHOTO BY DD RIDER

At her death in October, Carla Bley may not have become a "household name" like Duke Ellington or Miles Davis, but her music had a huge impact from Europe to Japan, even more than in the United States. She was a composer, pianist, arranger, and conductor whose work spread through 60 albums, more than half under her name. Imbued in all of her orchestrations is an original sense of humor. Diagnosed with brain cancer in 2018, she recorded her final album the next year and titled the record *Life Goes On*.

"Avant-garde" showed up in some obituaries, while others labeled her "modernist," "operatic," "funky," "free jazz," "easy listening," and "comedic." Her music contains all of those qualities and more. For my money some of her best big band music borrows from Kurt Weill and Nino Rota, then adds swing and her unique humor. Some album titles: *Big Band Theory*, *Dinner Music*, *Social Studies*, *The Lost Chords*, and among her tunes are "The Lone Arranger," "Piano Lesson" (she plays scales; the band improvises), "Copyright Royalties," "The Girl Who Cried Champagne." Her album covers often have running visual gags. You want more humor? Check out Bley's website, which is set up as a prison colony.

Carla Bley never got rich, but she was hugely influential in mid-to-late-20th-century music, most strongly through her compositions that a *Who's Who* of jazz have recorded, and for arranging and conducting Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra in some of the most political and beautiful orchestrations extant, including 1983's *Ballad of the Fallen* (based on Latin American political songs), and 2005's *Not in Our Name* (American anthems reconfigured in reaction to the U.S. invasion of Iraq). She and her big band have played critical roles on three of late producer Hal Willner's all-star concept albums, notably the acclaimed *Amarcord Nino Rota*.

Awards came, including a 1972 Guggenheim fellowship for music composition. She was named a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master in 2015, and voted into the DownBeat magazine Hall of Fame in 2021.

From the start she had to fight to get what she wanted, which was for her compositions to be noticed. Women in music were kept in the background, especially in the male-dominant New York City jazz scene. When Bley moved to New York City at 17 to make her name as a jazz composer, there really wasn't a precedent. She was young, colorful (especially her hairdos), and driven. And other musicians quickly took notice.

Lovella May Borg was born in Oakland, California, in 1936. Her father Emil Borg was a Baptist church organist, pianist, and choirmaster. Carla studied piano from the age of three, and her early years were immersed in religion. "My whole family is religious," Bley said after a 1981 concert in San Francisco. "I used to play here (the Bay Area) with Youth for Christ. I only played church music my first 15 years, then jazz. I never noticed the difference; it's all sacred music. It moved me in the same way when I heard either music. That hymn, 'The Lord Is Listening to You, Hallelujah,' I wrote that last week." In 1996 she recorded an entire album drawn from her religious roots, *The Carla Bley Big Band Goes to Church*.

"My mother died when I was 8, and I ran wild from that time until I left home. My father let me do anything, so there weren't hard feelings when I left." She dropped out of Oakland's Castlemont High School at 15, and tried supporting herself as a pianist in bars near the University of California at Berkeley campus, then went on the road as pianist with Oakland folksinger Randy Sparks (who later formed the popular folk choir New Christy Minstrels). But she had a desire to see Miles Davis at Café Bohemia. "I definitely moved to New York [at 17] with a clear vision of getting into music. At that time Bay Area music in general, even the opera, was tenth-rate music. The rock scene had been exciting to me, the 60s, the Fillmore and all, but the muse switches cities. I went to New York for the music." She landed a job as a cigarette girl in jazz club Birdland, where she heard some of her favorite musicians while working the customers.

The musicians she met early on remained close regardless of personal relationship. In 1957 she married pianist Paul Bley, who encouraged her writing and arranging. Carla's life and duo partner of the past 35 years, Steve Swallow, had been attending Yale to become a Latin teacher when the jazz fever hit, and soon he was immersed in Dixieland jazz at the age of 19, "when I was yanked from New Haven to New York by Carla and Paul Bley to play bass with Paul." The bassist Charlie Haden met her when he made his recording debut playing on Paul Bley's 1958 album *Solemn Meditation*, which featured one of Carla's early compositions, "O Plus One," a pun on opus one.

> **"CARLA BLEY WAS HUGELY INFLUENTIAL IN MID-TO-LATE-20TH-CENTURY MUSIC, MOST STRONGLY THROUGH HER COMPOSITIONS THAT A *WHO'S WHO* OF JAZZ HAVE RECORDED."**

Soon her compositions were getting attention. They have been recorded by dozens of musicians over the decades, among them John McLaughlin, Ursula Oppens, Don Ellis, Leo Kottke, Mary Halvorson, Jaco Pastorius, Jimmy Giuffre, NRBQ, George Russell. In 1967 vibist Gary Burton with a 10-piece band (including Carla on piano) recorded her album-length statement, *A Genuine Tong Funeral*. In 1975 Burton added a second album of Bley compositions, *Dreams So Real*. By the early 70s when she began recording her own music, she couldn't get a record company to issue it, so she and second husband and longtime business manager, Austrian trumpeter Michael Mantler (their daughter Karen Mantler was playing in Bley's big band at the age of eight), formed their own record label, Watt, and when friends in the U.S. and Europe couldn't get distribution for their recordings, the pair started New Music Distribution Service. NMDS lasted a few years and was influential, and led to Bley being signed to Manfred Eicher's prestigious ECM Records. "We always were tied to ECM," she explained, "because we distributed it in the States, and they distributed us in Europe."

Acclaim began with her arranging and conducting the award-winning 1969 Charlie Haden *Liberation Music Orchestra* album, full of avant-garde master musicians (Don Cherry, Gato Barbieri, et al.) playing heart-rending versions of Spanish Civil War songs. It was the beginning of life-long association with Haden, arranging and conducting his always political and always brilliant LMO albums. Another break (more critical than commercial) came with her uncategorizable 1972 three-LP "opera," *Escalator Over the Hill*, with a 36-member band of jazz revolutionaries, and vocals by everyone from Jack Bruce (late of Cream) to Linda Ronstadt (not yet well-known), Bley's young daughter Karen Mantler, and Andy Warhol actress Viva. Carla said in a 1974 *Newsweek* full-page article, "I decided to write *Escalator Over*

the Hill (because) they always accuse women of not being able to do two things—architecture and composition." Then she began to record her own albums, mostly large band recordings full of big ideas in the early years, and more recently chamber duets with Swallow, or a trio with Andy Sheppard, intimate, often delicate, extremely beautiful.

The ten-member big band was the perfect instrument for Bley's vision, mixing a wild variety of styles with some of the best improvisers of the era, and a balance of serious, challenging music with hilarious musical jokes. Her band members were hand-picked for a reason, much like Duke Ellington's: "I used to think if I wrote the music exactly as I heard it in my head, that the band could play it with that feeling. But I learned the hard way that it takes more than just being able to read music. Each of these guys is in the band not because of his musical ability, but because of his ability to express the feeling I'm after. Because I know what they are capable of, I can write with my musicians in mind."

As for those band members, she had stories, among them: "I hired (iconoclastic singer Jonathan Richman's drummer) D. Sharpe because of his name. I had listened to Jonathan's 'Egyptian Reggae' and loved it." For the 1981 live band album *I Hate to Sing*, she goosed non-singer Sharpe into singing the title tune.

> **"I ENJOY THE NEW YORK TIMES' ATTEMPT TO CATEGORIZE CARLA BLEY IN ITS OBIT HEADLINE: 'SLY COMPOSER OF JAZZ IN ALL ITS VARIATIONS.'"**

"I went to Stockholm to work with Swedes, and they took me to a club to see (organist) Jack McDuff. He had the best alto player I ever heard, Steve Slagle, so I met Steve and said, very carefully, 'You play good,' and he says, 'Thanks. I live in New York.'" Slagle explained that two weeks after they met in Sweden he was rehearsing with the Big Band in New York for a European tour. "Carla was the first person I met who was an all-day serious composer, all the time. We'd do a tour and the charts would be new compositions. She wrote pieces for me, and for the other guys in the band, for our individual voices. Most of our work was in Europe where her audience went beyond the jazz audience, which was also true almost anywhere she played. We were paid well, stayed in the great hotels and got used to a better way of life on the road."

On October 17, 2023, Carla Bley died in her Willow (a hamlet of Woodstock), New York home at the age of 87. She leaves a legacy of compositions, dozens of recordings, and an extended family of some of the most creative musicians of the last half century who played in her bands and recorded her compositions. For a musician who can't be categorized, I enjoy the *New York Times*' attempt in its Carla Bley obit headline: "Sly composer of jazz in all its variations." tas

PHOTO BY KLAUS MUEMPFER

LEARN SOME COOL STUFF ON OUR YouTube

SEE CUSTOMER SYSTEMS ON OUR Instagram

Hi-Fidelity Music Systems
Upscale Audio
Southern California

FYNE AUDIO
F702SP
Floorstanding Loudspeaker
$15,999 (pair)

Immediacy, dynamics, presence. All in a contemporary form factor for medium- to large-sized rooms.

SBOOSTER
AIB Bluesound NODE
Connection Kit
$523.99

New for 2024: Add this internal power supply board and linear power supply to your Bluesound NODE for a better, quieter level of sonic performance.

PRIMALUNA
EVO 100 Tube Phonostage
MM/MC Phono Preamp
$3695

All-tube design: 12AX7 for MM gain, 6922 for MC gain, 5AR4 tube rectification, and, very unusually, EL34 PSU filtration.

CABASSE
Rialto
Wireless Bookshelf Hi-Fi System
$3995 (pair)

A complete audio system, and with Cabasse's legendary custom DSP and room correction. Comes with an LCD touchscreen, one amp per driver, and coaxial three-way design.

T+A ELEKTROAKUSTIK
DAC 200
Preamplifier / DAC
from $7125

Separate DSD and PCM circuits, full galvanic isolation, and a de-jitter masterclock and filter... great engineering makes beautiful music.

MY SONIC LAB
Ultra Eminent EX
Moving Coil Cartridge
$6995

The high-flux Al-bodied cartridge that Herb Reichert of Stereophile said sounded like analog tape, it had such a high amount of low-level detail.

MUSICAL FIDELITY
A1
Integrated Amplifier
$1699

Reviving a classic design, the improved power supply and 25 watts of Class-A power, paired with the right speakers, will make you want to revisit your entire music collection.

Free Expert Setup

Just check a box and have a leading analog expert set up and test your turntable! We will install and align the cartridge, set up and align the tonearm, test and adjust speed, top up bearing oil, and more. Our experts use high-tech tools, but always do final testing by ear. All settings are documented and labeled to make it easy to unpack your table and start rocking.

0% APR for 36 Months*

Check your rate in seconds at upscaleaudio.com without affecting your credit score.

*Subject to approval of credit application. Rates range from 0% to 29.99% APR. APRs will vary depending on credit qualifications, loan amount, and term.

EXPERT ADVICE. EXCLUSIVE DEALS. NEW & USED.

UPSCALEAUDIO.COM 909.931.9686

PHOTO BY ANTHONY DEAN

The Renaissance Revisited

Piffaro Tells Stories with Dulcians and Sackbuts

Peter Burwasser

The tambourine toss says a lot about the performance style of Piffaro. Robert Wiemken, the retired co-artistic director, explains the origin of the practice. "Grant Herreid was on stage right playing tambourine while I was on stage left playing hand drum. The immediate segue into the next piece required that I somehow get the tambourine, and Grant move to guitar. How to get the tambourine across stage to me? Well, Grant just tossed it and I caught it right at the downbeat. That began the famous 'tambourine toss' that got higher and higher with each iteration, climaxing in our May 2022 concert with the highest toss yet, caught dramatically on video for all posterity to witness."

Yes, Piffaro concerts are fun. Wiemken and his co-director Joan Kimball have always made sure that their live performances, in addition to being meticulously well-played, capture the joy of music making that surely inspired the original creation of the Renaissance music that is their repertoire. The historical period of music that Piffaro researches and performs covers roughly 1450 through 1650, or the late medieval through early baroque, and includes a huge variety of styles, but the core of the band has always been wind music, specifically works for shawms, dulcians, sackbuts, and recorders (the antiquated predecessors, respectively, of oboes, bassoons, trombones, and flutes). Percussion and guitar have also been regular components, and vocal music is frequently supplied by guest soloists and choruses.

Piffaro originated as an outgrowth of the early music ensemble Penn Collegium Musicum. Kimball and four other musicians broke off from the Collegium in 1980, and Wiemken came on board a couple of years later, and what was then known as the Renaissance Wind Band was born (it was renamed Piffaro by the end of the decade). Within a few years, as Piffaro acquired new members and better instruments, they made their first two recordings for the Newport Classics label. Then, a serendipitous experience propelled the ensemble to international fame. After performing at a festival in Germany in 1993, the group was contacted by a representative of Deutsche Grammophon who happened to be in the audience, and a four-record deal ensued. Piffaro subsequently recorded for the defunct Dorian label (in the acoustically acclaimed Troy Savings Bank venue) and is currently heard on Parma Recordings.

It is Parma that produced one of their most unusual and beloved recordings, a vespers setting by Kile Smith. Smith is not a 16th century artisan; rather, he is a contemporary composer with a major body of work inspired by the choral and polyphonic traditions of sacred music. Wiemken (who happens to be an ordained Lutheran pastor) and Kimball proposed the idea to Smith of writing new music based on Lutheran hymn tunes for their Renaissance band "over martinis," and he was immediately taken by the concept. The wonderful choral ensemble The Crossing was subsequently added to the team. The result is a glowingly beautiful work that comes across as stylistically timeless.

There is an unusual aspect to the playing of Piffaro's ancient material that adds a poetic sense of mystery to their performances. Unlike most music, roughly from the late Baroque to the present day, there is no continuous tradition of performance practice for Renaissance music. The genre was not revived until the 20th century. All of the instruments are modern reproductions. In practice, this means that contemporary performers of this music must rely on intuition and taste to make the music seem authentic. In the case of Piffaro, it has been an ongoing process. Most of the material is based on vocal music, says Kimball, and so she preaches that a good guide to interpretation is to have "one eye on the music and one eye on the text." Wiemken concurs, adding that he views their performances as drama, "the telling of a story." To that end, Piffaro concerts are always centered around a theme, such as "Italian Music in the Court of Isabella d'Este," or "1623, The Year the Music Died," with carefully researched collectible booklets passed out to all concertgoers.

It is natural that the successor to Kimball and Wiemken as artistic director of Piffaro is a musician with deep ties to the band. Priscilla Herreid has been playing with Piffaro since 2005, and even took recorder lessons with Wiemken as a high schooler. She was trained as a classical oboist, but has barely played the modern instrument since becoming immersed in the world of Renaissance music. She is reticent about changing much about the successful model that her predecessors lovingly created, which she credits as a "one of kind invention," although she will tone down some of the overt theatricality that they enjoyed, such as the ceremonial march by the band into the performance space, with bagpipes droning, especially in this post-COVID age. But the entertainment factor will still prevail, since, as she properly contends, "the fun is in the music itself."

SOUNDINGS
FINE AUDIO VIDEO
MAGICO IN COLORADO
Exclusively at Soundings Fine Audio Video

soundingshifi.com
9625 East Arapahoe Road | +1 (303) 759 - 5505
Unit L, Greenwood Village, Colorado 80112

UNITED HOME AUDIO
WASHINGTON DC · VIRGINIA · MARYLAND
540-295-8313 · audio@unitedhomeproducts.com

2023 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD
2021 the absolute sound PRODUCT OF THE YEAR AWARD
YOU THINK YOUR AUDIO SYSTEM SOUNDS GOOD NOW?
ADD A SUPERDECK AND BE TRANSPORTED TO THE ORIGINAL PERFORMANCE!

THE TP-1000
NEW GENERATION PROFESSIONAL TAPE MACHINE

Pro Audio Ltd. proaudio@comcast.net
847-526-1660 Brian Tucker
Axpona Room 428

Is it master tape or is it Safir 9?
40 years continuous revolution
KUZMA

Exclusive USA distributor: Elite Audio Video Distribution, Glendale, CA / 818-245-6037
www.eliteavdist.com; scot@eliteavdist.com
Selected US dealers: Upscale Audio
La Verne, CA 91750 / 909-931-9686
kat@upscaleaudio.com
MoFi Distribution
1811 W Bryn Mawr Ave, Chicago, IL 60660
norberts@mofi.com
hi-fi+ WINNER 2022
Kuzma Ltd, Slovenia • www.kuzma.si • kuzmaltd@siol.net

Rock Renaissance Man

Steven Wilson's Latest Serves up Cinema for the Ears

Greg Cahill

He's regarded as the patron saint of prog rock. And rightly so. Grammy-nominated singer, songwriter, musician, and producer Steven Wilson rose to fame as a member of the British prog-rock band Porcupine Tree. He's also the man behind a slew of critically acclaimed classic-album remixes. And then there are his solo projects. Wilson has described his seventh and latest solo album, *The Harmony Codex* (Spinefarm), as an "experimental 65-minute labyrinth of a record...a piece of 'cinema for the ears.'" One caveat: this dynamic recording will put your system to the test—be sure your subwoofer is up to the task (my usually reliable 200-watt, 8" B&W sub barely managed bass duties on "Inclination," the trippy space-rock track that opens the album, though it fared better on the poppier "What Life Brings").

Ever the Renaissance man, Wilson wrote and produced *The Harmony Codex* and handled most, but not all, of the vocals and instruments, from acoustic and electric guitars to synthesizer programming. The press material for the release notes: "Working alone in a studio tucked inside the garage of a North London townhouse, Wilson pieced together the album's ten tracks with remote assistance from an array of friends and fellow artists, from longtime studio partners Ninet Tayeb [the Israeli singer is a frequent collaborator of Wilson's], Craig Blundell, and Adam Holzman to such first-time collaborators as Jack Dangers (Meat Beat Manifesto) and Sam Fogarino (Interpol). Each was invited to add their own individual stamp to the recording—the snares, strings, and sampled sounds sent down the wires giving rhythm and color to Wilson's already elaborate musical vision."

Tayeb's soaring vocals shine on "Rock Bottom." Avant-jazz saxophonist Theo Travis contributes an incendiary solo to the Robert Fripp-inspired "Impossible Tightrope," which also features the gifted violinist Ben Coleman (a former bandmate from Wilson's No Man band). That track leaves little question that Wilson, whose music often pays homage to prog-rock pioneers, is the rightful heir to King Crimson's musical fortunes. Those influences emerge organically, even while Wilson remains wholly original and thoroughly modern. After all, what's not to like about the *Blade Runner*-esque title track? Or the riveting "Actual Brutal Facts," a nod to *Black Star*-era Bowie? Or that Smiths-meets-Pink Floyd at a Fripp concert vibe on the intriguing "Staircase"? The result is a complex, richly textured, brooding, often ethereal album that conjures an intoxicating dreamscape while meditating on life, and never fails to deliver.

The Harmony Codex is available on multiple formats: Black and colored vinyl, CD, 5.1 surround and Atmos Blu-ray, cassette tape, and streaming, as well as a three-disc audio/visual deluxe edition.

Meanwhile, this tireless studio wizard isn't resting on his laurels as a solo artist—he seems to be spending *a lot* of time in that London garage these days working on classic rock. His credits include 29 spatial-audio remixes, including Atmos and 5.1 surround-sound mixes, ranging from pop (A-Ha, Simple Minds) to mainstream rock (Jethro Tull, Roxy Music) to prog (King Crimson, Yes). Entrusted recently with what is arguably the greatest rock album of all time, the Who's 1971 classic *Who's Next*, Wilson contributed revelatory 24-bit/96 kHz stereo and DTS 5.1 surround and 24/48 Dolby Atmos mixes to the album's sprawling 2023 multi-disc super-deluxe edition. Some layers of the original multi-track master were missing, but Pete Townshend re-recorded lost synth parts and other missing layers were extracted from existing copies using software. As a result, Wilson's 5.1 mix adds striking center-channel presence to Roger Daltry's vocals, while drawing out John Entwistle's snaking bass lines, the subtle details of Townshend's acoustic-guitar parts, the richly textured synth programming on "The Song Is Over," drummer Keith Moon's volcanic eruption at the end of "Won't Get Fooled Again" and Dave Arbus' soaring Celtic-inflected fiddle solo on "Baba O'Riley." More recently, Wilson remastered Jethro Tull's *War Child: The Theatre Edition*, featuring ten previously unreleased orchestral tracks and surround-sound mixes.

As for Porcupine Tree, founded in 1987, the future is uncertain. Simultaneously with the release of *The Harmony Codex*, Porcupine Tree released *Closure/Continuation.* A concert film and live album, *Live* documents the band's 2022 performance at Amsterdam's 17,000-capacity Ziggo Dome.

Is that the band's swan song?

Stay tuned.

ESPRIT

www.esprit-audio.fr

The *Sonic Life* of Thurston Moore

New Memoir Sheds Light on NYC Music Scene

Hannah Blanchette

To read Thurston Moore's memoir, *Sonic Life*, I wandered around my own city with the book in hand. It felt strange to read it at home on the couch when the book itself is restless, depicting a young Moore constantly in motion, always heading to the next gig, the next record store, the next job. I took the dust jacket off to carry it around, and whenever I spent hours reading it, the cover left a little residue on my fingertips, a reminder of where I had disappeared to. And no matter where I read—libraries, coffee shops, bus stops, planes—my mind would leave that place and become immersed in the punk and downtown music scenes of 1970s and 80s New York City, emerging later completely dazed by my actual surroundings.

Sonic Life is a detailed account of Thurston Moore's experiences as a guitarist, songwriter, and music lover. While this book will certainly be of interest to Sonic Youth fans, Moore's recollections of the punk and downtown music scenes appeal to a broad audience of post-punk, no wave, and experimental music enthusiasts. Moore chooses a traditional, chronological structure, beginning with his childhood and ending with the release of Sonic Youth's final studio album, *The Eternal* (2009). The majority of the book covers Moore's young adulthood in New York City and Sonic Youth's formation. This chronology is felt in only a way a music fanatic could convey—through singles. Especially in Moore's pre-Sonic Youth years, he marks time with the release of singles by Patti Smith, The Clash, The Ramones, The Sex Pistols, and many others. His perspective begins to shift as Sonic Youth takes off, time instead experienced through their singles, albums, and tours as he transforms from solely a music fan to full-time musician.

Moore also divides the book into short chapters and sections, another aspect of the book's format that contributes to its restless quality, as Moore jumps from vignette to vignette, moments in time snapshotted before barreling ahead. I find this aspect of the memoir to be a strength, as it mirrors the very real experience of flipping through one's memories. The brevity of the chapters doesn't detract from Moore's detail, as he often imbues his tales with dialogue and inner thoughts, moments seeming to play out right in front of you.

Throughout the book, Moore sees New York City through the people he meets almost more so than the places he goes. When he talks about the venues he would frequent, his visions of these places are shared via who is there instead of what these places looked like. It's a distinctive way to describe place that is equally as evocative. Through Moore's eyes, CBGB was Richard Hell trying to sneak Moore in the front door and A's was Glenn Branca unleashing his excruciatingly loud, ringing guitar ensemble. This approach places you in the crowd, elbow-to-elbow with legends as if they're your next-door neighbors, breathing life into venues that have long since shuttered.

Moore's *Sonic Life* is written by someone who has unabashedly loved rock his whole lifetime, and with that comes the occasional tendency to wax poetic about his experiences and surroundings. However, the intermittent flowery language and periodic overuse of listing names do not overshadow Moore's overall strengths as a storyteller and writer. He can vividly portray people without being overly descriptive, his anecdotes about the individuals he meets in his life adding dimensionality to them in a way that mere adjectives about personality and appearance never could. Moore paints an image of him and his best friend from adolescence, Harold, the pair listening to records in Moore's bedroom while Harold ties and unties Moore's shoelaces, back and forth. Fast forward in time to the early friendship between Moore and Kim Gordon, and he shares a memory of him calling up to her apartment, Gordon peeking her head out the window with a smile and tossing her keys down in a sock.

Interspersed with all of the glamor and tribulations of being a rock musician are snippets of simple life. None of these things are insignificant to Thurston Moore, honored as equally valuable to every show, album release, and accolade. What could be considered mundane is filtered through the gaze of an ambitious young musician who saw opportunity around every corner. From the first story he tells of becoming electrified by the Kingsmen's "Louie Louie" in 1963, Moore captures that feeling and catapults you right into it with him, that thrill that returns again and again throughout a sonic life.

Ad Index

Aaudio Imports 121
aaudioimports.com
Accuphase 125
accuphase.com
Acoustic Signature 161
acoustic-signature.com
Aesthetix 133
aesthetix.net
Analog Audio Design 193
analogaudiodesign.com
Aqua Acoustic Quality 45
aquahifi.com
AtmaSphere 114
atma-sphere.com
Audio Skies 73
audioskies.com
Audioarts NYC 77
audioartsnyc.com
AudioQuest ..... Cover II
audioquest.com
Audiovector 35
audiovector.com
Axiss Audio 47, 69, 125
axissaudio.com
AXPONA Audio Expo North America, LLC 187
AXPONA.com
Baetis Audio 143
baetisaudio.com
Basis Audio 5, 157
basisaudio.com
Bel Canto Design 117
belcantodesign.com
Benchmark Media Systems, Inc. 101
benchmarkmedia.com
Bending Wave USA 51
bendingwaveusa.com
Burmester Audiosysteme Gmbh 23
burmester.de
Cable Company 60, 62, 63, 143
thecableco.com
CH Precision 59
ch-precision.com
Clearaudio 111
musicalsurroundings.com
Constellation 49
constellationaudio.com
Crystal Cable 19
crystalcable.com
Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems 52
dandagostino.com
DS Audio 141
musicalsurroundings.com
Dynaudio North America, Inc. 151
dynaudio.com
Elite AV Distribution 193
eliteavdist.com
Elusive Disc 96
elusivedisc.com
Emerald Physics 61
underwoodhifi.com
Enklein 167
EnKlein.com
Esprit Cables 195
esprit-audio.fr
Estelon 169
estelon.com
Felix Audio 127
harmoniadistribution.com
Fidelis Distribution 99
fidelisdistribution.com
Focal Naim America ..... Cover III
focalnaimamerica.com
Franco Serblin 47
francoserblin.it
Furutech 159
furutech.com
GoldenEar Technology 13
goldenear.com
Gryphon Audio Designs Aps 27
gryphon-audio.dk
Hana by Excel Sound 21
hanacartridges.com
Harbeth Audio Ltd. 101
harbeth.co.uk
Harmonia Distribution 43, 127, 153
harmoniadistribution.com
Harmonic Resolution Systems 65
avisolation.com
Harmonic Technology 38
harmonictech.com
Hear This LLC 91
hearthis.us
HiFi Rose 33
hifirose.com
JMF Audio 73
jmf-audio.com
KEF America 9, 71
kef.com
Kimber Kable 154
kimber.com
Kuzma Ltd. 215
kuzma.si
LINN Incorporated 80, 81
linn.co.uk/try-linn
Lumin Music Systems 57
luminmusic.com
Lyra Analog 39
lyraanalog.com
Magico, LLC 3
MagicoAudio.com
Magnepan 115
magnepan.com
MBL North America, Inc. 83
mblnorthamerica.com
MoFi Distribution 33, 131
mofidistribution.com
MSB Technology 135
msbtech.com
Music Direct 108, 109, 113
musicdirect.com
Musical Surroundings 21, 111, 141
musicalsurroundings.com
Neotech Marketing Group Inc 168
neotechcable.com
Nordost Corp. 129
nordost.com
Nuprime Audio 123
nuprimeaudio.com
Pangea Audio Distributing 149
pangeaaudio.com
Paradigm 163
paradigm.com
Pass Laboratories 119
passlabs.com
PrimaLuna USA 153
primaluna-usa.com
Pro Audio Ltd. 193
proaudio@comcast.net
PS Audio 145
psaudio.com
PSB Speakers International 41
psbspeakers.com
Raidho Acoustics 183
raidho.dk
Rhapsody.Audio 93
rhapsodynyc.com
Rockport Technologies 107
rockporttechnologies.com
Rogue Audio 99
rogueaudio.com
Schiit Audio 139
schiit.com
Scott Walker Audio 105
scottwalkeraudio.com
Shunyata Research 6, 7
shunyata.com
Siltech 29
siltechcables.com
Snake River Audio 123
snakeriveraudio.com
SOtM 101
sotm-audio.com
Soulution 69
soulution-audio.com
Sound Organisation 103
soundorg.com
Soundings HiFi 193
soundingshifi.com
Source Systems, Ltd. 57
sourcesystemsltd.com
Spin-Clean 137
spinclean.com
Stenheim Suisse Sa 165
steinmusic.de
Stillpoints 75
stillpoints.us
Suncoast Audio 89
suncoastaudio.com
Synergistic Research 147
synergisticresearch.com
TAS Subscription Information ..... Cover IV
theabsolutesound.com
Technics 79
technics.com
The Voice That Is 25
thevoicethatis.com
TheAbsoluteSound.com 143
theabsolutesound.com
Theoretica Applied Physics 185
theoretica.us
Ultra Systems 60
ultrasystems.com
Underwood Hifi INC. 61
underwoodhifi.com
United Home Audio 193
unitedhomeaudio.com
Upscale Audio 191
upscaleaudio.com
UsedCable.com 143
usedcable.com
Valve Amplification Co. (VAC) 85
vac-amps.com
Vitus Audio 37
vitusaudio.com
Voodoo Cable LLC 117
voodoocable.net
Wadax SA 14
wadax.eu
Westminster Lab 91
hearthis.us
Wharfedale 131
wharfedaleusa.com
Wilson Audio 11
wilsonaudio.com
Wireworld Cable Technology 67
wireworldcable.com
WYNN Audio 31
wynnaudio.com
YG Acoustics 55
yg-acoustics.com

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Peter Gabriel: *i/o.* Real World/Universal.

After a 21-year spell that produced only film scores, covers, remixes, and reimagined hits, Peter Gabriel has delivered a vital album of new studio material. He culled *i/o*'s 12 tracks from sessions recorded in 2021 with guitarist David Rhodes, bassist Tony Levin, drummer Manu Katche, and several guests. Brian Eno contributed synthesizers and sound design. Each song has received a Bright-Side Mix by Mark "Spike" Stent and a Dark-Side Mix by Tchad Blake, as well as an Atmos-ready In-Side Mix by Hans-Martin Buff. Gabriel parsed out *i/o* throughout 2023, releasing a streaming single on each full moon, starting with the cautionary "Panopticon." The final track—"Live and Let Live," a paean to pacificism—dropped in late November. Gabriel struggled to not be too moody on *i/o*, and on the funky "Road to Joy," the exhilarating "Olive Tree," and the percussive "This Is Home" he succeeds, blending introspection and world grooves. Yet, at its best, *i/o* is intimate, as on the reflective "Playing for Time"; "Love Can Heal," a cry against violence and political rancor; and the elegiac "And Still," a touching tribute to his late mother, Edith. Music marked by openness, honesty, caring, and love. Eternity. **Greg Cahill**

Further Listening: Peter Gabriel: *3*; Genesis: *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*; Robert Fripp: *Exposure*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Beirut: *Hadsel.* Pompeii.

To call something "perfect background music" might not always be considered a compliment, but Beirut's *Hadsel* creates just that, drawing warmth from the wild Norwegian landscape that inspired it, creating a stunning sonic soundtrack. The title track and opener of the eighth album from Zach Condon and Co. features a loop of chords played on an organ that blend into a melee of horns and voices, immediately establishing the lush and contemplative tone of the album. Texture is the secret ingredient on *Hadsel*, and the layering of well-utilized (and very forward) percussion, along with voices, horns, and organ drones characterize the album as well as set it apart in their discography. The lyrics are abstract and simple, short poems and repeating lines which aren't always articulated, but are beautifully supported by the impressionistic music. Besides the gorgeous opener "Hadsel," other standouts include "Arctic Forest," "January 18th," and "Süddeutsches Ton-Bild-Studio." The more folky, and traditionally Beirut-sounding tracks are fine and a nice change of pace on the record overall, but I found myself wishing for more organ-led pieces, and especially more of the instrumental tracks like "Melbu." Undoubtably though, *Hadsel* delivers something really special, and signals perhaps an exciting new direction for Condon and Beirut. **Jerika Hayes**

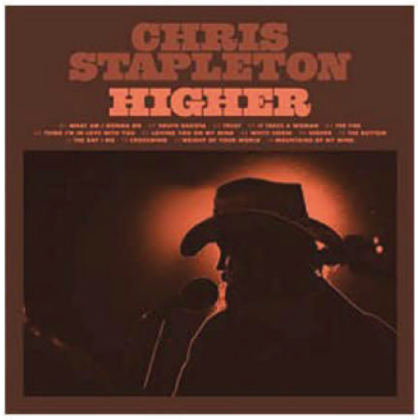
Further Listening: Sigur Rós: *Takk...*; Sufjan Stevens: *Javelin*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Andre 3000: *New Blue Sun.* Sony/Epic.

File under "Pop Oddity." As one-half of the hip-hop duo Outkast, Andre 3000 (aka Andre Benjamin) created, along with Big Boi, some of the most ecstatic music of the early-2000s. (Remember "Hey, Ya!"?) His debut solo LP, *New Blue Sun*, finds Andre creating spiritual music on which he plays a bamboo flute to create dreamy soundscapes. Such track titles as "Ghandi, Dalai Lama, Your Lord & Savior J.C./Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy" serve as Zen koans to pull listeners out of their comfort zone. Why a New Age album? The title of the opening track says it all: "I Swear, I Really Wanted to Make a 'Rap' Album, But This Is Literally the Way the Wind Blew Me This Time." The result is soothing, in a wind-chimes in the backyard, spa-music sort of way. Collaborators include synth programmer Surya Botofasina, an acolyte of the late Alice Coltrane, whose musical and spiritual influence resonates throughout this album. Composer Carlos Nino adds bells, chimes, and percussion, and Nate Mercereau lends guitar flourishes. Andre also employed a digital wind instrument called the Roland Aerophone Pro AE-300. Audiophiles blessed with a system capable of catching his rarified air are in for a treat. **GC**

Further Listening: Alice Coltrane: *Journey in Satchidananda*; Harold Budd & Robin Guthrie: *Before the Day Breaks*

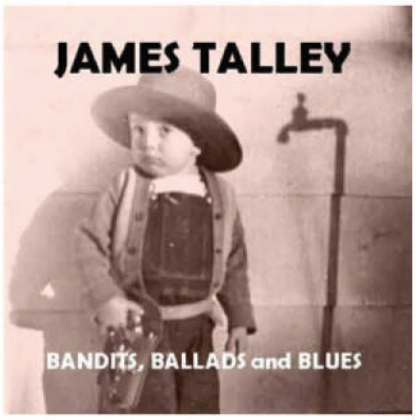


MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Chris Stapleton: *Higher.* Mercury Nashville.

Since releasing his debut album less than a decade ago, Chris Stapleton has dominated Nashville's country music scene through the power of his voice and distinctive songwriting. A consummate songwriter, Stapleton received his initial acclaim while writing hits for artists like George Strait a decade before his debut in 2015. His music and persona are much more of an outlaw throwback than a reflection of Music City's neutered pop/country brand. *Higher* underscores his songwriting strengths while offering a resonant collection of country-tinged power balladry. Most of the songs deal with familiar romantic tropes of love and heartache. Two highlights in a row, "Think I'm in Love with You" and "Loving You on My Mind," sound closer to soul than country with warm arrangements of pulsing bass, spare, wiry guitar refrains, the swell of strings, and Stapleton's emotionally wracked voice; you get the sense he may be listening more to Marvin Gaye than Hank Williams Jr. lately. It's not just love and roses, though, as "South Dakota" rolls out with a greasy guitar groove, all swagger and swamp vibe. "Crosswind" rumbles in melodic mid-tempo as Stapleton belts out a trucker's tale with pedal steel etching the white line highway the whole way. **Greg Gaston**

Further Listening: Dale Watson: *Starvation Box;* Deke Dickerson: *Rhythm, Rhyme & Truth*



MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

James Talley: *Bandits, Ballads and Blues.* Cimarron.

If one can be an outlaw on the margins of "outlaw country" music, that's been James Talley for the past 50 years. In that time he's gone from promising talent with a Capitol Records deal to a fully independent artist, still acclaimed but having never attained the iconic stature of Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt, let alone Kris Kristofferson or Willie Nelson. On his 15th album, Talley, now 80, sounds very much like he did on his debut LP *Got No Bread, No Milk, No Money, But We Sure Got a Lot of Love*, warmly voicing the same compassion and affection for working folks, renegades (Billy the Kid, Jesus, Black Jack Ketchum), and personal loved ones. He still taps melodies, rhythms, chord changes, guitar patterns, and western swing instrumentation (fiddle, trumpet) derived from his inspirations—Woody Guthrie, Hank Williams, and Bob Wills. New songs like "If We Could Love One Another," "My Little Corner of the World," "The Dreamer," and "In These Times" echo the plainspoken idealism and decency of the repertoire standards—"Are They Gonna Make Us Outlaws Again," "Tryin' Like the Devil," "Sometimes I Think About Suzanne"—that made him the late Rosalynn Carter's favorite singer. **Derk Richardson**

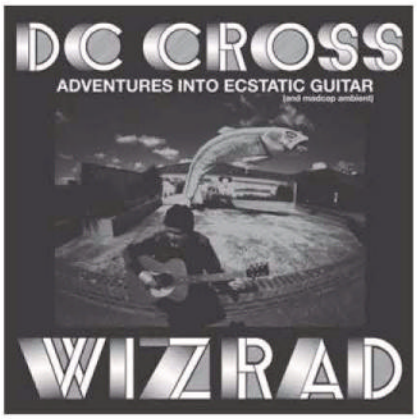
Further Listening: Merle Haggard and the Strangers: *The Legend of Bonnie & Clyde;* James Talley: *Touchstones.*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Chatham County Line: *Hiyo.* Yep Roc Records.

When Chatham County Line lost its banjo player Chandler Holt to retirement, the remaining band members did the right thing: they reinvented themselves, adopted new ideas about soundscapes, found fresh sonics in traditional instruments, and adopted other ideas from a wide palette of sounds. Now the trio, supplemented by synths, Optigan, mellotron, octave mandolin, and clavinet fashioning often otherworldly, ambient settings, rises strikingly altered from the band that claims four #1 bluegrass albums among its achievements. *Hiyo* recounts a mess o' bloodletting (the murder ballad "Way Down Yonder"), alcohol- and blues-fueled trysts (the eerie "Heaven"), dead-end jobs and dead-end lives (the roiling "BSR"), depthless loneliness and longing ("Summerline," part avant-saloon song, part hymn). The vocals, plaintive and ethereal, often sound chillingly disembodied, as if the singer were a spirit reporting from the other side, with all manner of ghostly blips and bleeps swirling ominously around the tracks amidst the guitars, pedal steel, fiddle, and percussion. *Hiyo* breaks into the light with "Right on Time," a galloping country outpouring with soaring, triumphant vocal harmonies celebrating a life renewed by love. Witness, then, Chatham County Line, renewed its ownself. **David McGee**

Further Listening: James Justin & Co.: *Places;* The Earl Brothers: *The Earl Brothers*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

D.C Cross: *Wizrad.* No Drum Records.

The solo acoustic guitar has a revered history in the United States and United Kingdom, forged by labels like Takoma Records and guitarists such as Leo Kottke and Davey Graham. Under the name D.C Cross, guitarist Darren Cross brings his Australian identity to the fore on his new album, *Wizrad*, which pays homage to the acoustic guitar legacy of the aforementioned figures while carving out his own space of what he describes as "ecstatic guitar." Mastered by fellow guitarist Chuck Johnson, *Wizrad* pulls together solo acoustic guitar, ambient, and field recordings to create a unique collection as equally indebted to John Fahey as it is to Brian Eno. Cross' playing style is fast-paced, maintaining interest through folk and blues-inflected harmonic changes with melodic fragments tossed into the fray ("Brumby Revisited," "A Harebrained Adventure of an Amateur Shaman"). In between solo guitar pieces, *Wizrad* presents interludes of manipulated field recordings and ambient tracks, such as distorted birdsong ("Birdy Birdy") and droning new age ("New Page"). While I would enjoy hearing these electronic elements integrated more within the acoustic guitar pieces, D.C Cross' separation of these styles presents distinct landscapes, compelling reflections of his environment through the sounds that can best represent them. **Hannah Blanchette**

Further Listening: Daniel Bachman: *When the Roses Come Again*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Sen Morimoto: *Diagnosis.* City Slang/ Sooper.

Jazz rapper Sen Morimoto creates a cinematic slice of indie-rock, pop, industrial, hip-hop, and jazz on an introspective set of angsty observations cloaked in a sheen of cool. Morimoto, 30, was born in Kyoto, Japan, and raised in Massachusetts. His music reveals hints of Beck and the Eels, punctuated by shiny Todd Rundgren-inflected backup vocals, shifting time signatures, and a "Maggot Brain"-worthy buzzsaw guitar break in the opener, "If the Answer Isn't Love." He has said *Diagnosis* is a commentary on the personal and social impacts of capitalism. This song cycle reads like an audio journal. "It's not a diagnosis/It's a Catch-22/You live a long life/Doing what you have to do," he sings on the title track. "He captures the innocence of love (Naïve") and the challenges of holding on to it ("Feeling Changes," "Pain"). He ponders dread ("Pressure on the Pulse") and despair ("Surrender"). Ultimately, his often deceptively breezy pop reflects on living in a world on fire and trying to make sense of it all. "I was on my way to the end of time/We were going to see if the reason rhymes," he sings on the trip-hoppy "St. Peter Blind." Morimoto's jazz rap proves to be a healing balm. **GC**

Further Listening: Mitski: *The Land Is Inhospitable and So Are We*; Funkadelic: *One Nation Under a Groove*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Reverend Kristin Michael Hayter: *SAVED!* Perpetual Flame Ministries.

A collection of original songs, hymns, and folk tunes, Kristin Hayter's *SAVED!* is unlike anything else. Hayter's out-of-time odyssey fearlessly looks back, ahead, and inward through various Christian tales of apocalypse, death, and life's trials and tribulations. Through expert recording manipulation, the sparse instrumentation (only acoustic guitar and prepared piano) is paired with manufactured field recordings of some long-lost tent revival, succeeding in crafting a complete sonic world that maximizes the emotional effect of the arrangements. While her previous records under the moniker Lingua Ignota focused on the trauma of domestic violence, this new era opts instead for larger questions of salvation and existence. On one of the original songs, "I Will Be with You Always," the lyrics reference Hayter's personal hardships, but are filtered through a more hopeful lens than ever before. The last song, a simple arrangement of the hymn "How Can I Keep From Singing," slowly fades in wild glossolalia over the top of Hayter's controlled alto, ultimately concluding the record with the ecstatic sounds of an "unknown language." *SAVED!* is a demanding, immersive, and unique listening experience that shows Hayter's visionary talent as composer, singer, producer. **JH**

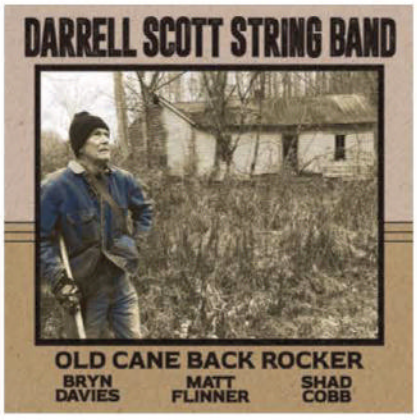
Further Listening: Lingua Ignota: *SINNER GET READY*; Johnny Cash: *Hymns from The Heart*

MUSIC SONICS

Teresa James & The Rhythm Tramps: *Rose-Colored Glasses Vol. 2.* Blue Heart Records.

A Texas native long since transplanted to Los Angeles, Teresa James seems to have time on her side, since she only gets better as the years roll by and the kudos accumulate since her first appearance on record with the Rhythm Tramps in 1998. *Rose-Colored Glasses*, her second 2023 album release following *With a Little Help from Her Friends*, which found her giving Beatles songs an invigorating fresh coat of paint, boasts a full slate of adventurous original songs and inspired band support from the current Rhythm Tramps. For her part, Ms. James, nominally a blues singer, with the lived-in voice to match, veers into soul and R&B territory and even ventures into classic saloon balladry with the lush, piano-driven love song, "The Idea of You." Elsewhere, a horn-infused Southern soul groove animates the buoyant "I Don't Need Another Reason to Fall in Love" (practically an homage to the style Steven Van Zandt fashioned for Southside Johnny & the Asbury Jukes) and a righteous, funky Staples feel drives the bluesy "Nothing for Certain," a topical advisory for the populace to remain alert to sketchy characters and vigilant in a world "gone crazy." Right on time and right for the times, she is. **DM**

Further Listening: Marcia Ball: *Roadside Attractions*; Lisa Mills: *Triangle*



MUSIC SONICS

Darrell Scott String Band: *Old Cane Back Rocker.* Darrell Scott.

Darrell Scott has recorded 18 albums over the course of his career. His first, *Aloha from Nashville*, was released in 1997. His latest, *Old Cane Rocker*, continues his string of remarkable albums chock full of great songs. How great? Scott's past songs have made a serious impact on the world. His biggest hits include the Dixie Chicks' version of "Heartbreak Town" and "Long Time Gone" as well as Patty Loveless' rendering of "You'll Never Harlan Alive." On *Old Cane Rocker* Scott enlists fiddler Shad Cobb, mandolin and banjo player Matt Flinner, and Bryn Davies on stand-up bass. Recorded at eTown Studios in Boulder, Colorado, and Song Food Studio in Tennessee by James Tuttle and mastered by Richard Todd in Nashville, the album sounds wonderfully natural on my Qobuz at 96/24. Scott's fine vocals are front and center, with the band's three-part harmonies filling in behind him. With seven new originals along with a rerecorded version of "Great Day to Be Alive," the album has a consistently organic feeling that defines "Americana" music. High points on the album include a duet with John Cowan on "Southern Cross" and a stellar version of Matt Flinner's instrumental "Raji's Romp." **Steven Stone**

Further Listening: Matt Flinner: The *View from Here*; Darrell Scott: *Aloha from Nashville*

MUSIC SONICS

Luke LeBlanc: *Places.* Real Phonic Records.

In this age of corporate songwriting, where one pop tune can be written by a half-dozen contributors, it's refreshing to hear songs from a single person with strong emotional content. Luke LeBlanc delivers personal songs with addictive melodies and well-considered lyrics. LeBlanc's third LP release, *Places* features a mix of acoustic and electric instruments played by seven accompanying musicians that include John Cleve Richardson on piano and dobro, Caz Falen on bass, Erik Koskinen on electric guitar, Eric Haywood on pedal steel, Kora Melia on violin, Casey Frenz on horns, and Lars-Erik Larson on drums. Leblanc's slightly smokey lead vocals would probably never garner him a spot on *The Voice*, but his vocal textures work beautifully on his original songs. His lyrics are primarily focused on personal stuff—love, loss, freedom, and life issues. All the tunes have a level of affability combined with catchy hooks that can easily develop into earworms that pop into your head during quiet moments. The production, recording, and mixing were all done by Erik Koskinen, who avoids the temptation of mixing the electric guitar up front, creating a setting where Leblanc's songs can shine brightly. **SS**

Further Listening: David Wilcox: *My Good Friends*; Ben Gage: *Two Singing Songs*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●◐

Art Farmer: *Portrait of Art Farmer.* Craft Recordings.

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●◐

Steve Davis: *Meets Hank Jones, Volume 1.* Smoke Sessions.

What these two albums, recorded 50 years apart, have in common is the elegant presence of the great pianist Hank Jones. The eldest of the musical Jones brothers out of Detroit (trumpeter Thad was five years younger, drummer Elvin nine years younger), Hank moved to New York City in 1944 and soon became immersed in the emerging bebop scene before touring as Ella Fitzgerald's accompanist for five years (1948–1953). He subsequently recorded six albums as a leader before 1958's *Portrait of Art Farmer*, his second encounter with the trumpeter and first for Lester Koenig's Contemporary Records.

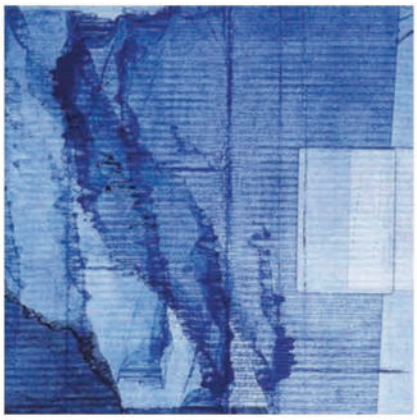
The Hank Jones heard on this session with Farmer is primarily in accompanist mode, playing it understated and politely inside, more like his role models Teddy Wilson and Earl Hines. On tunes like Benny Golson's "Stablemates," George Russell's "Nita," and the standards "By Myself, "The Very Thought of You," and the beautiful ballad "Too Late Now," Jones distinguishes himself with harmonic facility, taste, and sophistication. And he solos with skill and conviction, particularly on the trumpeter's tunes "Back in the Cage" and "Earth." The more loosely interactive wild card of this session is drummer Roy Haynes, whose conversational approach on the uptempo burner "And Now…," Farmer's runaway romp based on the rhythm changes, finds him engaging in scintillating exchanges of eights with the trumpeter.

The more impressionist and playfully unpredictable side of Jones comes across on a 2008 previously unreleased trio session with trombonist Steve Davis and bassist Peter Washington. Performing just a month shy of his 90th birthday, the pianist lends his exquisite touch and individualistic style on one Davis original and several well-known numbers from the Great American Songbook. This second encounter between Davis and Jones (they had previously recorded together on *Eloquence*, Davis' 2007 outing on Smoke Session) radiates with that rare group chemistry and personal expression that defines jazz at its finest.

Their hookup is immediately apparent on the opener, Davis' "Interface." With its allusions to John Coltrane's "Blue Train," the title track of his 1958 Blue Note album featuring trombonist Curtis Fuller, Davis carries the melody with his warm, buttery tone, which is underscored by Jones' singular comping and personal touch on his solo. His playing on the Rodgers & Hart nugget, "Isn't It Romantic?," is so syncopated and brimming with playfully eccentric turns that it adds a dash of humor to the elegance. And on a bluesy rendition of the torch song "Cry Me a River" (popularized by Julie London's 1955 hit version), Jones leans into a jaunty stride feel at times to give the song some *vonce*.

But the highlights here are three intimate duos between trombonist and pianist on "Polka Dots and Moonbeams," "We'll Be Together Again," and a delicate "But Beautiful," the latter finding Davis channeling his inner Bing Crosby on the affecting melody of that Jimmy Van Heusen-Johnny Burke number from 1947's *Road to Rio*. Throughout this superb album, Jones' exquisite and organic unpredictability is the very essence of effortless mastery. **Bill Milkowski**

Further Listening: Steve Davis: *Think Ahead*



MUSIC ●●●◐○ SONICS ●●●●○

BlankFor.ms/Jason Moran/Marcus Gilmore: *Refract.* Red Hook Records.

Pianist-composer Jason Moran has distinguished himself throughout his chameleonic career by the risks he has taken. An uncommonly open-minded, high-concept musician, he has been involved in multimedia art and theatrical installations while also releasing albums combining post-bop and avant-garde jazz, blues, classical music, stride piano, and hip-hop. In this collaboration with electronic musician and cassette tape loop renegade BlankFor.ms (aka Tyler Gilmore) and drummer Marcus Gilmore, Moran enters new sonic terrain, offering freewheeling improvisations on top of the electronic textures and interactive polyrhythms provided by Gilmore. While pieces like "Onset I" and "Onset II" and the sparsely compelling "Affectionate Painful" and "Stir" may harken back to Brian Eno's collaborations in the early 80s with pianist Harold Budd, pieces like "Inward Curve" and "Eighth Pose" have a swinging forward momentum that would fit right in with other neo-jazz artists like Makaya McCraven, Kassa Overall, and Mark Guiliana. Founded in 2020 by Sun Chung after his decade-long tenure at ECM, Red Hook Records has fast become a forerunner in combining electronic and acoustic instruments. *Refract* is their latest crowning achievement. **BM**

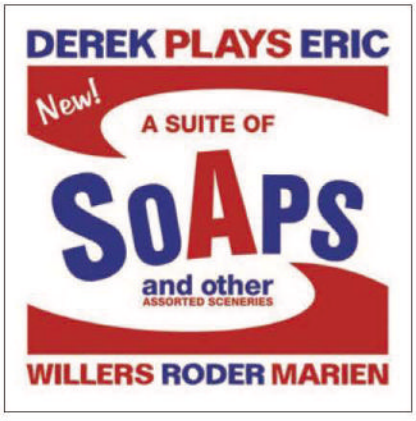
Further Listening: Leo Smith/Qasim Naqvi/Andrew Cyrille: *Two Centuries*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●◐

Terry Riley: ***Standard(s)and: Kobuchizawa Sessions #1.*** Star.

An album that includes solo performances of six jazz and Broadway standards is not what you'd expect from Terry Riley if you know him as a "godfather of minimalism," the composer, keyboardist, and electronic music pioneer who gave us *In C* and *A Rainbow in Curved Air*, the collaborator with John Cale and the Kronos Quartet, and a student of Pandit Pran Nath. But Riley has jazz deep in his bones. In his twenties the now 88-year-old California native played ragtime in San Francisco clubs and jazz and improvised music in European piano bars, and he names Art Tatum, Bill Evans, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis as influences. Riley lives now in Japan and it was there, in 2020, that he recorded this program, in which three originals, including a ballade and a rag, are sandwiched between the likes of "Isn't It Romantic," "'Round Midnight," "Yesterdays," and "It Could Happen to You." Acoustic piano holds center stage, but synthesizers, overdubs, and a 45-second vocal lagniappe broaden the sonic palette. Moods range from reverent to whimsical, and with his idiosyncratic phrasing, chord formations, melodic extrapolations, and uses of space and silence, Riley unlocks previously unknown chambers of possibility in even the most familiar of songs. **Derk Richardson**

Further Listening: The Rileys: *Way Out Yonder;* Sarah Cahill: *Eighty Trips Around the Sun: Music by and for Terry Riley*



MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

Derek Plays Eric: ***A Suite of Soaps and other assorted sceneries.*** Jazzwerkstatt.

The group's name is an inside joke for broadminded guitar aficionados. It refers, yes, to Eric Clapton, but not to his "Layla" band Derek and the Dominos, but rather to the late British pioneer of free improvisation, Derek Bailey. Not that any of the dozen tracks on this second album by the Berlin-based power trio of guitarist Andreas Willers, bassist Jan Roder, and drummer Christian Marien direct your attention directly to either said Derek or Eric, but there are enough elements of both jazz abstraction and rock energy to warrant the pretense. Willers, who draws the most attention with his off-kilter melodic ideas and jittery rhythms, composed the title seven-song suite, the amusing and provocative titles of which include "Deep Fried Prog," "Greed Mongers," and "A Lame Excuse." But the tight-knit communication between Willers and Roder and Marien is the pivotal ingredient that elevates the proceedings beyond novelty with their interpretations of the album's deep-track covers: Gentle Giant's "Cogs in Cogs," Matthew Moore's "Space Captain" (indelibly interpreted by Joe Cocker and later by Herbie Hancock with Derek Trucks and Susan Tedeschi), bassist Dave Holland's "May Dance," and the album's journey-to-the-center-of-your-mind psychedelic closer, The Beatles' "I Want You (She's So Heavy)." **DR**

Further Listening: Harriet Tubman: *The Terror End of Beauty*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●○

Archie Shepp: ***Derailleur: The 1964 Demo.*** Triple Point (LP)

This previously unissued recording was a self-produced demo that Archie Shepp hoped would land him a deal as a leader, after having worked as a sideman with Cecil Taylor and then in cooperative units (The New York Contemporary Five, The Archie Shepp/Bill Dixon Quartet). Whether this helped him get a contract with Impulse! is unknown, but John Coltrane's influence was probably the deciding factor. For the occasion, Shepp basically used the group co-led by soprano ace Steve Lacy and trombonist Roswell Rudd, but the spotlight is decidedly on Shepp's fiery tenor throughout. Lacy and Rudd do get some good short solos in, and there are delicious improvised ensemble passages, but for some of these the balance tends to favor the leader overmuch, the only blemish on the surprisingly superlative sonics. The program consists of Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady" and two Shepp originals: "Viva Jomo," a tricky uptempo riff tune in 5/4, and a rough-edged R&B rocker called "Dunbar Days & Miami Joys." Side A features the takes used on the demo and it's great. The B side alternates sound like warm-ups, but they do contain great moments, especially from the leader. An absolute must for Shepp fans. **Duck Baker**

Further Listening: Archie Shepp: *Four for Trane;* Steve Lacy: *Evidence*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Cannonball Adderley: *Somethin' Else.* Blue Note/Mobile Fidelity (2 LPs).

Released in 1958, *Somethin' Else* is a gorgeous, inventive outing. Nodding to the following year's *Kind of Blue*, alto saxophonist Julian "Cannonball" Adderley teams up with Miles Davis (trumpet), as well as Hank Jones (piano), Sam Jones (bass,) and Art Blakey (drums). Given that *Somethin' Else* is one of the most reissued of jazz LPs, how does MoFi's new Ultradisc One Step sound, and is it worth buying yet another version of this set, particularly given the $125 price of admission? I don't own an original and haven't heard the original tapes both are mastered from but did compare MoFi's release (which now divulges the DSD step) to the currently available Blue Note Classic Vinyl release ($28), an all-analog pressing mastered by Kevin Gray. The Mofi hits all the audiophile marks: great presence, punchy dynamics, detailed and articulated bass, more precise if essentially dual-mono imaging: extended frequencies, air, and three-dimensionality. The Blue Note, by contrast, is warmer and tonally sweeter, the imaging is less locked in place and more evenly spread across the stage. It's not as exciting on a sonic level, but musically it's more knit together and it swings more. For me it sounds more like guys making music together in the same room. **Wayne Garcia**

Further Listening: Cannonball Adderley with Bill Evans: *Know What I Mean?*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Ella Fitzgerald: *Let No Man Write My Epitaph.* Verve/Acoustic Sounds (LP).

Ella Fitzgerald took part in four major movie productions (including an Abbott and Costello feature!), in each case basically playing herself, that is, a jazz singer. Her last movie was *Let No Man Write My Epitaph*, an all-star noir inner city tale from 1960. She sings three numbers in the film, which were selected from a set of 13 songs. This vinyl release (a pet project of Chad Kassem, the CEO of Acoustic Sounds) is a newly re-mastered collection of all of the songs, from a variety of composers, and including several standards. Some of the buzz about this superb recording perpetuates the canard that Ella could be emotionally aloof, and that this intimate arrangement, with solo piano as the only accompaniment and unusually close vocal miking, is an antidote to that notion. But her extraordinarily precise technique never displaced her dramatic intuition, although this astonishingly vivid recording certainly places a magnifying glass on that ability. Among the standards here, "Misty" and "One for My Baby (and One More for the Road") are both delivered with exquisite poise and a magical sense for dramatic pacing. Her pianist, Paul Smith (who is not even credited on the album cover) provides basic but elegant support. **Peter Burwasser**

Further Listening: Ella Fitzgerald: *The Complete Piano Duets*; Paul Smith: *Charlie Parker for Piano*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●○○

Don Byas: *Classic Don Byas Sessions 1944–1946.* Mosaic (10 CDs).

The remarkable thing about the latest Mosaic release, a 10-CD set containing 193 tracks, is that it covers so much ground even though it's limited to a three-year period. That tells you how active tenor saxophonist Don Byas was between 1944 and 1946, and the scope and quality of the performances also tells you what a fertile period the mid-20th century was for jazz. Born in 1913, Byas had been a working musician for almost 15 years by 1944, and he was in the epicenter of the jazz world during the period when swing still ruled but bop was being born. Byas is sometimes the band leader on this box set; in the other settings (there are many) you'll hear him playing either a significant solo or obbligato, and you'll have no trouble recognizing his big tenor sound with a raspy vibrato that combines sophistication and swagger. The box set pulls together a remarkably wide swathe of musical talent (bandmates include Hot Lips Page, Joe Turner, Charlie Shaver, Barry Harris, Max Roach, Dizzy Gillespie, and Shelly Manne), and by doing so it confirms what a wild mix of musicians cross-pollinated during that era. Kudos to Mosaic for gathering together so much midcentury magic. **Jeff Wilson**

Further Listening: *Ben Webster Meets Don Byas*; Dizzy Gillespie: *Horn of Plenty*

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Sommerro: *Borders.* Groven, Engelberg, Thorsen. Trondheim SO, Davies. 2L (Pure Audio Blu-ray & SACD).

If you want to experience Dolby Atmos in its purest form, Dolby TrueHD—as opposed to the very lossy Dolby Digital Plus variant that's streamed—your choice of music is pretty limited. As of this writing, there are under 150 albums (discs and/or downloads) with a Dolby TrueHD program and I'd estimate that a third of them come from the Norwegian label 2L. Morten Lindberg, 2L's cofounder and engineer/producer, undertakes a truly immersive approach to recording, placing his microphone array in the middle of an ensemble, sometimes presenting a 360-degree representation of a performance. 2L's catalog includes some jazz and a lot of classical. In terms of the latter, there is 18th and 19th century material, both familiar (Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart, Beethoven, Grieg) and specialized (Ole Bull); there's 20th century repertoire (Stravinsky, Britten, Nielsen, Bartók) and loads of choral music. Most significantly, Lindberg's label has championed music by living Norwegian composers, especially Ståle Kleiberg and Henning Sommerro.

For this two-disc release—the SACD and Pure Audio Blu-ray hold no fewer than seven audio versions of the program—the Trondheim Symphony Orchestra under Nick Davies, a Welsh-born conductor who has built a successful career in Scandinavia, accompanies three concertos by Sommerro. Two feature unusual solo instruments. Harmonica virtuoso Sigmund Groven commissioned *Solkverv (Solstice)*. It tells the mythic story of the 11th-century Icelandic bard Sigvat Tordsson as he journeys to Rome and back, the harmonica representing the protagonist with perky, chirpy figurations as well as arching melodic phrases. The musical language is tonal, occasionally film score-like without becoming trite. Sommerro is a gifted orchestrator.

Ostara is the Saxon goddess of spring, and associations of the pan flute with that season of the year, as well as nature and fertility, seem appropriate. Sommerro thoroughly explores the range of possibilities with this folk instrument that's usually employed as a musical seasoning. (*Titanic*, anyone?) Elements of dance and ritual evoke a sense of rebirth and regeneration. Primordial scenes are summoned up, though this music doesn't aspire to emulate *The Rite of Spring* in scope and savage power—the finale, a daft, off-kilter waltz that evolves into a reckless gallop, makes sure of *that*. Roar Engelberg is the adept soloist.

Last is *Borders,* with violin as a more traditional solo voice and starring 2L's favorite fiddler, Marianne Thorsen. The work was commissioned in 2016 when large numbers of refugees were arriving in Europe from many war-torn places; a large orchestra showcases brass and engages with the soloist to produce a sense of crisis and, ultimately, the peace that comes from welcoming strangers. The second movement, "Lament," is achingly beautiful and, throughout, Thorsen plays with technical assurance and an intensity suggesting a redemptive morality.

The recording, originally in DXD 24-bit/352.8kHz, is sensational. Lindberg's immersive technique is an excellent strategy for recording a small instrument—and harmonica and pan flute are about as small as they get—without a need to inflate loudness and image size. Brass sonorities are exceptionally lifelike. The recording was made in a Trondheim church, a large space for which the height channels of an Atmos setup help greatly to illuminate. **Andrew Quint**

Further Listening: Sommerro: *Ujamaa & The Iceberg* (2L)

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

For Clara. Grimaud, Krimmel. Deutsche Grammophon.

Nominally, Robert Schumann's eight-movement piano suite, *Kreisleriana*, was dedicated to Chopin but, in reality, it was written for Clara Wieck, who would finally marry Schumann over the strenuous objections of her father two years later. The impetuous nature of several movements contrasted with the tender, yielding character of others sound very much like a young man in love. Hélène Grimaud has the technique and, more importantly, the heart to perform them all convincingly. From the time he showed up at the Schumann's doorstep as a clean-shaven 20-year-old, Johannes Brahms was also head-over-heels for Clara, a devotion that lasted more than four decades. Grimaud plays his four Intermezzi, Op.119, the last works he wrote for piano, with great sensitivity. Lastly, Grimaud partners with baritone Konstantin Krimmel in Brahms' *9 Lieder and Gesänge*, which sets texts by two 19th-century German poets, August von Platen and Georg Friedrich Daumer. It's not hard to believe that Brahms saw himself as the protagonist in these lovesick songs and Clara as the unobtainable object of his melancholic longing. DG's sound offers an ideal concert hall perspective, with the piano weighty but not overly immediate and Krimmel's richly textured voice possessing a powerful ring to its top register. **AQ**

Further Listening: Silvestrov: *Silent Songs* (Krimmel/Grimaud)

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

Anshel Brusilow Conducts the Chamber Symphony of Philadelphia—The Complete RCA Album Collection. Sony (6 CDs).

I was taken aback when, soon after I met him, Rostropovich told me that half of the people who had mattered to him were dead. It was 1978, and Rostropovich was 51.

Now, many of the people who have mattered in *my* life are gone—my parents; nearly all of my teachers from high school, college, and grad school; my publisher; and a constellation of performers and composers I got to know personally and became close to over the years, including Rostropovich, Bernstein, Copland, Ginastera, Penderecki, Jochum, Giulini, and Istomin.

All of them gone. Now I understand what Rostropovich was saying. Yet performing artists remain alive if their records do. Hence the enormous value of recordings.

Such were the thoughts occasioned by this reissue of the six recordings made in 1967–68 by the Chamber Symphony of Philadelphia during its all-too-brief existence under Anshel Brusilow's direction, recordings that have been out-of-print for more than 50 years and whose welcome reappearance heals what had been for me a significant breach in the catalog. Reissues like this fill not just *discographic* lacunae, but often the lacunae in our own lives, reminding us of a time when we were young, and our musical experiences were new and formative.

Philadelphia-born Brusilow (1928–2018) studied violin with Efrem Zimbalist at Curtis, and later conducting with Pierre Monteux. From 1959 to 1966 he was the concertmaster of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and an excellent one at that (check out the orchestra's 1962 recording of *Scheherazade*, in which he plays the solo). He formed the Chamber Symphony of Philadelphia in 1965, recruiting an extraordinary group of players that included Stuart Canin (concertmaster), William Steck (assistant concertmaster), Carlton Cooley (principal viola), William Stokking (principal cello), James Caldwell (principal oboe), and Vladimir Sokoloff (piano).

Before playing a note in concert, the group had a recording contract with RCA, and between March 1967 and January 1968 it made six recordings, all in Town Hall (where the Philadelphia Orchestra had been making *its* recordings for several years). In order of release, they were: Brahms' Serenade No. 1 in D; Richard Yardumian's mass *Come, Creator Spirit* (the master tape having been lost, it was remastered for this box from the LP); a pairing of Tchaikovsky's *Mozartiana* and Arensky's *Variations on a Theme of Tchaikovsky*; a pairing of symphonies by Haydn and Cherubini; a French program featuring Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and works by Ibert and Françaix; and a coupling of Strauss' *Bourgeois Gentleman* and Wolf's *Italian Serenade*.

These are the recordings on which I discovered all of these pieces. They capture excellent solo work, lively playing from the ensemble, fine balances, and tapered phrasing all around. Half a century later, this is still my favorite Brahms Serenade, still my favorite account of the Strauss.

The sound on CD seems a bit "flat" (i.e., lacking depth, not flat in pitch), but what comes through on the 192/24 downloads seems wonderfully alive, with remarkable presence, depth, and tone.

After so many years, I'm truly happy these friends of my youth have been resurrected. **Ted Libbey**

Further Listening: Rimsky-Korsakoff: *Scheherazade* (with Brusilow) (Philadelphia Orchestra, Ormandy/Sony)

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●●

Berlioz: *Symphonie fantastique.* BSO, Seiji Ozawa. Deutsche Grammophon (LP).

Last year Deutsche Grammophon launched its Original Source Series project, celebrated DG recordings from the 1970s remastered for vinyl from the original 4-track tapes. Eleven titles have been released so far. Dating from 1973 when Seiji Ozawa was appointed music director of the Boston Symphony, this spectacular *Symphonie fantastique* was their first recording together and one of his best. "Reveries," the first movement, is rendered in bolder colors than usual and as a real *allegro appassionato*; the waltz (sans cornet) is light, delicate yet propulsive; the bucolic slow movement, often taken so slow as to stagnate, moves gracefully, the infusion of energy in the second half growing organically out of the first. "March to the Scaffold" is taken at a brisk clip, the guillotine landing with a mighty thwack, the crowd, eager for its pound of flesh, cheering lustily. "Witches' Sabbath," a riot of primary colors, garish textures, and fantastic instrumental effects, is dispatched with a hair-raising dynamism and adrenaline that rivals the classic recordings by Munch and Bernstein. Back in the day DG was often criticized for anemic bass and restricted dynamics. No worries here: with reference caliber sonics, the bass is staggering powerful, the dynamic window incredible. **Paul Seydor**

Further Listening: Berlioz: *Symphonie Fantastique, Lelio* (Orchestra National de L'ORTF, Jean Martinon/EMI)

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Beethoven: *Hammerklavier* Sonata. Stockhausen: *Klavierstück X.* Ponthus. Bridge.

Beethoven's monumental *Hammerklavier* piano sonata was so baffling for the composer's contemporaries, not to say ferociously difficult, that it was rarely performed for at least the next century. The music is much more accessible to contemporary audiences, tempered by the extreme stylistic trends of the 20th century, but no less wild and bursting with extreme emotions. These qualities make the 40-minute sonata a fascinating match up with the similarly exotic and technically punishing *Klavierstück X* by Karlheinz Stockhausen, which the composer directs to be played "as fast as possible." Pianist Marc Ponthus is a great champion of contemporary music, and has frequently programmed works by such modern figures as Boulez and Xenakis alongside Schumann, Bach, and Beethoven. There is a startling synergy when doing so, but for honest ears, there is a realization that for all of his innovation, Stockhausen, an enfant terrible if ever there was one, cannot approach the soaring majesty, humanity, and beauty of Beethoven. The *Hammerklavier* bundles up those qualities along with the fearless experimentation that would become a hallmark of the modern age. Ponthus plays Beethoven with the tempo extremes that the composer seemed to intend, resulting in a thrilling, daring performance. **Peter Burwasser**

Further Listening: Boulez: Complete Piano Music (Ponthus/Bridge)

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●●

Shostakovich: Symphonies Nos. 2, 3, 12, 13. Boston Symphony Orchestra, Andris Nelsons. Deutsche Grammophon.

Dmitri Shostakovich wrote 15 symphonies, of which the Fifth is, by far, the most performed and recorded. Some of them, including Symphonies Nos. 2 and 3, have been neglected due to their overtly political inspirations, but the composer proves that even Soviet agitprop can be well crafted. These two works sizzle with the same youthful brashness of the Symphony No. 1 that propelled Shostakovich to international fame. The Symphonies Nos. 12 and 13 come from an entirely different world view. The dual devastations of world war and Stalinism were behind him, and an earnest sagacity, although tinged by weariness, imbue both works. The 13th is subtitled "Babi Yar," and was premiered in Moscow in 1962. It is a setting of poetry by Yevtushenko, including a searing evocation of Nazi atrocities against Russian Jews. That content led to a quasi-official ban, in part arising from the thinly veiled antisemitism of the Soviet censors. It has survived as one of Shostakovich's most moving compositions. The performances by the great Boston band, led by its current music director, are spectacular, as is the superb engineering of the DG team (as heard via streaming on Qobuz). **PB**

Further Listening: Shostakovich: Symphonies 5, 8, 9 (Boston Symphony Orchestra, Nelsons/Deutsche Grammophon)

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Mozart: Piano Concertos Nos. 7 & 10. Concerto for Violin and Piano. Robert Levin. Academy of Ancient Music.

Robert Levin is both a performer and scholar of Mozart's music, with an aspiration to present the music as close to the composer's intentions as possible. To begin with, this means playing on an instrument that Mozart would have been familiar with, in the case of this recording, a reproduction of a 1795 Walter fortepiano. He also includes stylistically appropriate improvisations in his playing, a practice that Mozart expected, according to contemporaneous commentators. Levin's project to record all of the Mozart keyboard concertos was cut short by Decca pre-pandemic, but has been revived by the house label of the venerable Academy of Ancient Music. This latest release features two early Mozart concertos for two keyboards, with Levin joined by Ya-Fei Chuang. These are joyful, brilliant performances of these relatively youthful works, but it must be said that not everyone enjoys the sound of period ensembles, which are thinner toned and less dynamic than modern orchestras. But it is an undeniable reality that their sound is much closer to what the composer heard in his mind when he created the music, which makes these performances valuable to anyone who loves the music of Mozart (and who doesn't?). **PB**

Further Listening: Mozart: Piano Concertos Nos. 21, 24 (Levin/Academy of Ancient Music)

Younger generations are more focused on price and convenience.

Q&A

Joe Makkerh

Baetis Audio

Neil Gader

What ignited your interest in the high end? Was it driven by your love of music or an aptitude for audio electronics? Or both?

I was a home-theater buff who thought multichannel receivers were the pinnacle of audio quality. When the founder of Baetis Audio, John Mingo, sent me a Baetis system and a DAC to try out, I finally heard good two-channel sound. I was hooked.

What gear made up your first high-end system?

My first high-end system was only partially so. The above mentioned Baetis Audio Revolution 3 server and a Mytek Brooklyn DAC. The amp that was integrated into my Onkyo AVR and my BIC Acoustic floorstanding speakers never sounded so good! I knew I had to upgrade my other components, and so it began.

When did audio develop from a hobby to a career?

I was (and am) a member of the JRiver Beta Team. I used the software as a hobby, mostly for video. I helped people on the JRiver Interact forum. That's where John Mingo found me, and he wanted me to run customer service for Baetis Audio. It was a natural fit, and three years later, John sold the company to me!

Was your education in the computer science area?

My education was in Natural Sciences at Cambridge, originally starting with a focus on mathematics and physics, but I quickly veered off into cell and molecular biology. My PhD, also at Cambridge, was in cancer research. I later became a neuroscientist but have worked in several biomedical science fields, all with cell and molecular biology as my area of expertise.

How did Baetis Audio come about?

John Mingo started Baetis Audio in his pursuit of the perfect digital player. His research led to a staggeringly good product that has made every skeptic a believer. Sadly, he passed away a year ago. Once I took over the company, I focused on continuous improvement and outstanding customer relations. John fully supported how I moved ahead with the company, and our latest flagship models, the Reference Mingo and Reference Mingo Plus, are named in his honor. They bear his signature engraved into the chassis.

How do you define the difference between hi-fi and high-end audio?

Some people use the terms interchangeably. I would say "hi-fi" is more consumer-oriented and will only take you so far. "High end" is where the real palpable quality is, where good recordings can sound live and make you love music from genres you never considered listening to before.

Going forward, what are the greatest challenges confronting the high end?

There will be a challenge to produce lower-cost components as old-school audiophiles pass away. Younger generations are more focused on price and convenience. Getting young people to appreciate sound quality—and insist on artists maintaining/improving recording standards—will be an existential challenge for the industry. Otherwise, there will be very few people left to enjoy high-end components in 30 years. It's a shame, because the new listeners still have great hearing and should be reaping more joy from high-end audio than middle-aged people like me!

What is the greatest misunderstanding people have about media computers?

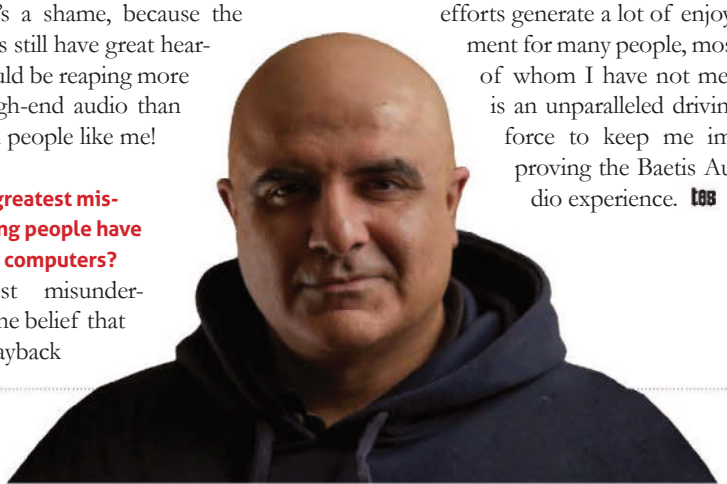
The biggest misunderstanding is the belief that all digital playback sources sound the same if they are lossless, and therefore a media computer is needlessly complicated and expensive when you can buy cheaper devices. It's clear that not all digital sources are equal, but getting this through to people is an uphill struggle. We've noticed, repeatedly, as have many of my customers, that DACs incorporating streaming do not sound as good as having the Baetis stream into the same DAC. By incorporating sub-par streaming into the DAC, the manufacturers are doing their DACs a disservice.

Looking ahead, how do you envision high-end systems changing in the next few years?

On the digital front, I think we will continue to see mediocre streaming devices with flashy interfaces gain popularity. DAC makers will integrate streaming more, without paying attention to its quality, assuming "digital is digital." The current analog-digital divide could grow, as vinyl lovers may never hear a truly excellent digital system in action.

Outside of audio, what do you do for fun? What (still) inspires you about your work?

I have had a multitude of interests over the decades. In recent years I have become a rally driving enthusiast in virtual reality. Somehow, in my 50s I became good enough to be consistently in the top 50 or so out of millions of users on a particular platform. I've become quite involved in the Global Rally Fans club and even host a podcast around this hobby. My work is inspired by the reactions my customers have to my products and customer service. Knowing that my efforts generate a lot of enjoyment for many people, most of whom I have not met, is an unparalleled driving force to keep me improving the Baetis Audio experience. tas



FOCAL

NEW TWEETER

NEW FINISHES

HOME COLLECTION I ARIA EVO X

MADE IN FRANCE

The Aria Evo X loudspeakers embody the essence of the High-Fidelity audio. Thanks to their exclusive Focal technologies, they deliver a natural, precise and detailed sound to create musical and home cinema experiences that inspire unparalleled emotion. Their impressive performance are matched by a timeless design signature, combined with premium materials and sophisticated finishes to enhance each and every listening session.

High-Fidelity guaranteed

focal.com | focalnaimamerica.com | Distributed by Focal Naim America | For more information : 1 800.663.9352 / info@focal-naim.com

the absolute sound®

Digital magazine subscription $10
Get Instant Delivery
Download & Read Offline, Anywhere
Mobile-Optimized Reading

https://www.zinio.com/the-absolute-sound-m39073

the absolute sound